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Editor’s Note

Writing in a very hungover state on an unseasonably warm New Year’s Day, the words on the computer screen about as fuzzy as my brain is functioning, I realize more than ever that, sometimes in life, tough choices need to be made. Like, for example, deciding once again not to participate in that famous film poll and doing my best to avoid any discussion of it, though I understand from glancing at the BBC website that some film about a woman cooking potatoes directed by Jeanne Dielman won. Another tough choice: I have gone with the normal formatting of the film *Tár*, because in all caps it just looks silly.

The toughest choice remains, and I am being honest here and not overdramatic. The current economics for small magazines such as they are (namely, awful), compounded by restrictions on the time of this overworked middle-aged gentleman (which, in turn, has compounded the acceptable amount of disorder that transpires every three months of each year), has made me question the viability of continuing to steer this publication through the troubled waters of the current state of cinema, and the arts in general. I am losing money on each issue, which is acceptable to me up to a point, though a decrease in grant funding for the upcoming year doesn’t help matters. After more than 20 years of doing this—and typing that really does make me feel old—it should be getting easier, but it isn’t. So my resolution for the forthcoming year is to resolve this issue, one way or the other.

Maybe it also has something to do with the feeling, with all of these (inevitable) filmmaker deaths, of reaching a kind of end point—maybe it’s better to be proactive and cut the cord rather than letting things slowly slip away. I have always felt that for an enterprise like this to continue, I would never ask for support from our readers other than the measly price of a yearly subscription, but it turns out that there aren’t nearly enough of these adventure-seekers among the 8 billion people out there, despite our efforts to produce something meaningful and, hopefully at least, well-considered. I would like to think that we have made—and continue to make—a small contribution to the advancement of a certain kind of filmmaking, though I also believe that if we were gone, there would not be so many people who would notice, and, after a while, the remaining few would forget.

I had hoped that we would reach the age of 100, but 93 is pretty damned old. We still might get there, and you might hear more concretely from me in the near future about how you can help, if I can get my act together and get some help from others. (Though if anyone reading this wants to publish a film magazine with an established brand and a stable of brilliant writers, or can just provide some financial support, please email me at info@cinema-scope.com. I’m not joking. All you multimillionaire movie stars and directors, trust me: this will look great on your Wikipedia pages.)

So, if this is the last you are going to hear from me, what the hell—here are the ten best films of all time: *Á bout de souffle* (1960); *Le mépris* (1963); *La chinoise* (1967); *Week-end* (1967); *Le gai savoir* (1969); *Numéro deux* (1975); *Passion* (1982); *Histoire(s) du cinema* (1988–1999); *Nouvelle vague* (1990); *Éloge de l’amour* (2001). And, if I could have an 11, I would add *Charley Varrick* (1973), the last of the independents.

—Mark Peranson

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Entre Nous

Alice Diop on *Saint Omer*

BY BEATRICE LOAYZA

In 2016, Alice Diop set out to the northern French town of Saint Omer to attend the trial of Fabienne Kabou, a Senegalese woman accused of killing her baby girl. The French media was enraptured by the crime; the details made for a textbook *fait divers,* a sensational news item spun by journalists desperate to satiate their scandal-starved readers. Yet, as the trial unfolded, Kabou and her actions remained distant and impenetrable; her case became a kind of mockery of our legal systems, reliant as they are on classification and concrete truths to administer justice. At every turn, Kabou defied expectations: she was an educated woman, beautifully articulate and poised even as she repeatedly tweaked her story depending, it seemed, on her mood. Baffled by her own decision to abandon her daughter on a beach, she claimed to be the victim of a voodoo spell. She claimed to love her.

Diop has no interest in "solving" the case of Fabienne Kabou. In *Saint Omer*, she reimagines the trial from the perspective of an individual likely unconsidered or ignored by the French media: a Black academic and writer, Rama (Kayije Kagame), whose own anxieties around motherhood and inheritance are exacerbated by the story of Laurence Koly (Guslagie Malanda), Diop's version of Kabou.

The first-generation daughter of Senegalese immigrants herself, Diop has long explored the frictions of modern French identity from the perspective of the marginalized: immigrants from former French colonies in Africa and Southeast Asia, and their children, often raised in the multiethnic urban peripheries, or *banlieues,* outside of Paris, where Diop herself was born. Her earlier documentaries unravelled bitter political realities from specific experiences and contexts: in *La mort de Danton* (2011), an aspiring actor from the working-class suburbs contends with the creative poverty of an artistic field dominated primarily by white people; in *La permanence* (2016), refugees divulge their hardships and desires during appointments at a migrant medical centre. In *Nous* (2020), Diop's canvas is larger. She traverses Paris along the RER B, a sprawling commuter rail that passes from the northernmost extreme of the city to the south, and meets up with everyday people: a mechanic from Mali; neighbourhood kids sliding down hills on scraps of cardboard; her sister, who is a home-visit nurse for the elderly. *Nous,* in its loosely limned structure, and in the declarative punch of its title, is Diop's grandest statement of intent: it bridges the divide between the centre and the periphery, the dominant and the marginal, urging us to build solidarities more profound than those premised on the politics of relatability. *Saint Omer* takes these principles and spins them into something like a ghost story in which mothers and daughters are haunted by one another.

Winner of the Lion of the Future award at Venice, *Saint Omer* is Diop's first fictional feature, though it mirrors the events of Kabou's trial, and employs dialogue drawn directly from court transcripts. The script was conceived in collaboration with the acclaimed French novelist, Marie NDiaye (who co-wrote 2009's *White Material* with Claire Denis), and Diop's editor, Amrita Davis, which might account for its lulling, elliptical structure relative to the discovery-driven highs and lows of the usual courtroom drama.

The trial scenes in *Saint Omer* play out long and uninterrupted, with cinematographer Claire Mathon relishing Laurence's Mona Lisa gaze, drawing us into her mystery at a meditative pace, and allowing the questions she provokes to seep into our bones—as they do into Rama's. At the beginning of the film, Rama delivers a lecture on Marguerite Duras, bringing to mind the writer's provocative 1985 *Libération* article, "Sublime, Necessarily Sublime, Christine V," in which she accuses a mother of murdering her four-year-old son. Rama, like Laurence, is an intellectual, formed in part by a Western education that sees her quoting Duras and studying the films of Pier Paolo Pasolini, which doesn't negate the particularity of her upbringing: in flashbacks, we see Rama as a child, perceiving her mother's solitude and depression, or nestled between family members dressed in bedazzled boubous and kaftans. It's not a contradiction, but rather a complication that dismantles archaic parameters of race and culture—a given for some of us, though not so obvious throughout the majority of France. Diop also summons Rama's childhood with home video-esque footage reminiscent of the director's archival self-insertion toward the end of *Nous.* In *Saint Omer,* Diop never enters the screen in a literal sense, yet the film is marked by the same intimacy of her documentaries, with Diop hovering phantom-like over the events, inviting us to listen, directing our collective gaze toward a common opacity.

Cinema Scope: Tell me about witnessing the trial of Fabienne Kabou. Is it easy to attend a trial in France?

Alice Diop: It's very easy. When I was there, I didn't have any intention of documenting or reporting on it, though I did take notes. I was simply drawn to this woman, the fact that she is Black, that she is gifted, and that she carries herself with such mystery and complexity.

Scope: What clicked in your head when you realized that you wanted to make a movie inspired by the events of Fabienne's trial?

Diop: It's complicated, and my reasons are somewhat obscure. I was captivated by the way she spoke, by the fact that she left her child on the beach. I'm not particularly attracted to *fait divers,* but rather, I was drawn to the nature of the tragedy, and the fact that this story felt like a very contemporary version of the classic story of Medea. So, I saw it as a lens through which I could explore ideas about motherhood and intergenerational connections.

Scope: Saint Omer, the city itself, represents a departure from your usual cinematic stomping grounds of Paris.

Diop: Saint Omer is a symbol. I was interested in the metaphorical dimension of a Black woman in a small provincial town, so it could've been any small town outside of Paris.

Scope: I read that a lot of the dialogue was drawn verbatim from the real-life trial. Can you talk about that decision and how you structured the trial dialogue?

Diop: Yes, the material from the film's trial comes from the minutes of the actual trial. In fact, my hope was that, through the use of fiction, I could bring to light precisely what I wished the transcripts had been able to tell me. I knew that they contained something that would allow one to interrogate what it means to be connected to a child—what does that inextricable bond between mothers and their children actually mean? It's through the character of Rama that these stakes become clear. Subjecting that material, in raw form, to the curiosity of a spectator would've been disturbing to me. As we sculpted down the raw text from the real trial, we realized the importance of filtering the dialogue through the fictional character of Rama. It needed to reflect off her to speak to the ideas I had in mind. Plus, the language used by Fabienne was truly unexpected—it was extraordinarily precise, even literary. Her presence, her words, are in part what allows the film to go beyond the literal.

Scope: Rama is the lens through which the trial is understood, but she's also a kind of surrogate for you, no? You are also a Black woman working in an artistic and intellectual field who attended the trial.

Diop: I prefer not to think of it that way, although she does represent a double portrait within which my own history is reflected. Everything Laurence says is refracted, like a prism, through

Rama's interior. This was my way of curtailing a voyeuristic gaze. We see the story from a place that is just.

Scope: You also collaborated on the script with Marie NDiaye and Amrita Davis. Were they as captivated by the story of Fabienne as you were?

Diop: They were fascinated, yes, but mostly I wanted to avoid using the usual techniques of screenwriting. Working with two people—a novelist and an editor—who aren't screenwriters allowed me to create a particular kind of language that eluded conventions. It was sort of a dialectical process, the way we drew from the trial text to create something totally new.

Scope: What was it about Marie's work that you felt made her a good fit for the film?

Diop: I called Marie because the accused woman's persona reminded me a lot of the characters from Marie's novels, in their complexity and their power. Besides, Marie has a way of working that uses mystery as a point of departure, and she's invented a very particular kind of language that seems to work around and encircle something invisible at its centre.

Scope: There's a long history of films that revolve around a trial or that employ the structure of a trial to ask questions about prevailing social attitudes and beliefs. I'm wondering if you conceived of *Saint Omer* with other courtroom films in mind.

Diop: Not really. For me it's not even a "trial" film. There is no sense of suspense. There are no revelations. What interests me about the structure of any trial is that it's a closed-door arena centred around speech. There's a metaphorical potency to this idea of people coming to this one place to hear what an accused person has to say and attempting to come up with a judgment based entirely on what is heard. So, it's a privileged site of hearing and speaking.

Scope: Interestingly enough, trials are about trying to pin down a kind of objective truth and about working through the actions of an accused person such that those actions can be properly classified and judged according to a fixed set of laws. At the end of the film, you don't bother to show us the outcome of the trial.

Diop: The question of moral judgment and the judiciary process doesn't interest me. I think the film is open, and it's set up in such a way that anyone who watches it becomes a jury member. You can come up with your own conclusion, though what interests me, what I'm trying to draw attention to, isn't a correct judgment. It's about listening. It's about tracing this woman's psychological contours in a way that allows you to question yourself and consider intimate questions of your own.

Scope: I want to talk about an important through line in this film that also figures throughout the rest of your work, this question of the universal. The idea of universality is historically fraught because it's often associated with whiteness and the notion that, per Richard Dyer, whiteness is a blank slate, unremarkable, neutral, and thus universally relatable.

Diop: For me, whiteness isn't universal. All my films say the contrary. They articulate the interior lives of Black characters but in a way that prompts big questions that should feel familiar to anyone. Laurence is a Black woman who killed her child because she was confronted with what may be one of the biggest human questions: What does it mean to be a mother? What is the nature of our connection to our own mothers? Every woman should be able to relate to this.

I'm a Black woman, yet I've recognized myself in works of art, literature, and films made by white people. I've been affected by the questions those works pose. When I read *Anna Karenina* or Victor Hugo, I see myself. I know that if I can do it, the opposite is possible. I'm convinced that white people can see themselves in and identify with Black people, even if the Black person in question is presented in a specific, culturally disparate way. African can contain the universal. The Black body can contain the universal. I dare you to say that when you read a book by Toni Morrison, even if you're white, its ideas have nothing to do with you.

It's true that Black experiences are rarely acknowledged. To upend this is my primary conviction, what guides me as a filmmaker. Rama is a Black woman, the child of immigrants, and her understanding of motherhood is filtered through her family's immigrant story. That's a very specific experience, both sociologically and culturally, but at the same time it contains something that is absolutely recognizable. It should resonate with women from all over the world, and that's pretty much the reason why I made *Saint Omer.*

Scope: I was blown away by the performances, particularly that of Guslagie Malanda, who plays Laurence. This being your first narrative film, I imagine it was also the first time you had to direct actors.

Diop: I didn't direct them so much as I simply chose them. My casting process was like a documentary film in that I was drawn to and chose a particular person because of their natural way of being. I didn't direct the actresses to perform or fabricate emotions. I felt that the best direction was to create the right context in which those emotions could be generated in real time, to bring a greater authenticity to them. That's part of the reason I recreated the trial and shot those scenes continuously as long 20-minute sequence shots. The continuity implicates the spectator in a way that makes them feel like they're attending the trial, so its quasi-documentary in the sense that I created a space of reality rooted in fiction. We'd shoot and there'd be no cuts or repeating things throughout that time, so everyone was rooted in the moment and its atmosphere. That required my actors to trust me a great deal, because I'm asking them to let go and tap into feelings that are deep within them. It was all about creating a fictional context in which the intensity of the moment could be felt and inhabited as much as possible. Those 20-minute takes allowed the actors to be intensely present, even those who were silent.

Scope: You've spoken in the past about how your work has always occupied this grey area between documentary and narrative. In terms of your process, how was *Saint Omer* different—or similar—to your way of working on your other films?

Diop: Documentaries can be very different from one another. Above all, I'm interested in creating new cinematic forms, and having it so that the formal aspects of the film are as closely aligned as possible to the subject. If a film has this level of intention, then it needs to be different every time. In some ways, I went

about making *Saint Omer* in the same way I've made my other films—with an emphasis on research, with a desire to invent the most just form for the subject, which in the case of *Saint Omer* meant I had to cross over into the realm of fiction.

The most significant difference for me with this film has been the reception and the new audiences I've been able to reach. Because it's a narrative film, there was a bigger, more global market for it. It was a Venice selection and it even received some prizes. So, it's been bigger for me in terms of visibility, because documentaries are more marginalized. Nevertheless, for me, documentary and narrative films stem from the same need and impulse.

Scope: Have you noticed any differences in how the film has been received in France compared to the rest of the world?

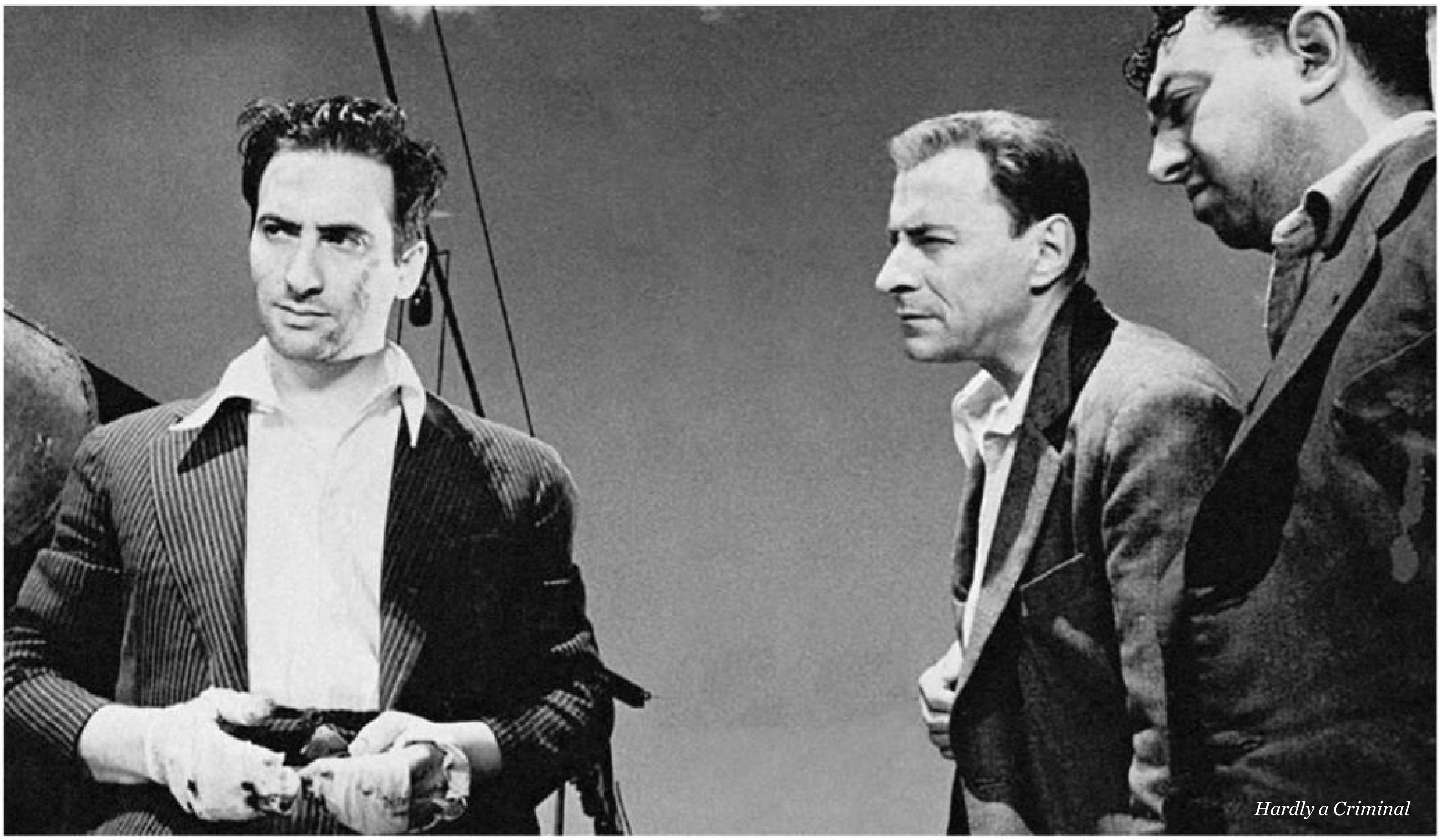
Diop: In France, the response to my film was huge. The film came out in November and the reviews were extremely positive. There were lots of articles and the whole thing felt like an event. At the same time, I did receive some negative criticism. However, I felt that it wasn't about the film, but rather about me. The most common complaint was that it was too pretentious because there are references to Pasolini and Duras. I'm convinced that this kind of criticism wouldn't have been applied to a film made by a white woman. For a Black intellectual woman to claim figures like Pasolini or Duras, for a certain—and very suspect—kind of French media person, it's not right. There was a review in, I think, *Le Figaro*, that compared *Saint Omer* to a French film about cleaning ladies and nannies—working-class women. The two films have nothing to do with each other! That film was a popular comedy! The review went on about *Saint Omer*'s arrogance and pretentiousness, and it used that other film to explain what *Saint Omer* could have done better. It also said that that other film hasn't been as widely recognized because a white guy directed it, whereas *Saint Omer* is being celebrated because a Black woman who cites Duras made it.

Scope: It's kind of like the scene in *Saint Omer* when the philosophy professor testifies and questions Laurence's interest in Wittgenstein.

Diop: That's exactly what it made me think of, and that's part of what motivated me to make the film—the violence of certain kinds of criticism against people or ideas that aren't where they're "supposed" to be. Laurence Coly is told she's too intellectual, that she should dedicate herself to subjects that are "Black" subjects. Though, I don't want to diminish the primarily positive response I received, which is huge because the film concerns something that's very rarely seen in French cinema and culture: that is, complex Black women who are also intellectuals. The US is more developed on this front. So, on the one hand, *Saint Omer*'s success is extraordinary, but it also points out there needs to be more. That it shouldn't be an exception, because if it is, then there will always be critics who question similar stories along the lines I talked about.

Scope: It's as you said before about the universal, only these critics insist on seeing Black people who are far from their own experiences, unrelatable.

Diop: Their critiques are extremely personal, too. It's as if they were addressed directly to me, because supposedly I'm arrogant. It reminds me of a film by Raoul Peck, *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), and this interview we see from the '60s in which James Baldwin is responding to a journalist and tells him, "I am not the Black person you want me to be." This is all very fresh for me, and these are just my first impressions. You see, I've just finished a marathon press tour of two months because the film just came out in France. So, it's been interesting to compare the discourse the film has elicited in France and abroad, and it's been enlightening to see that papers like *Le Figaro* aren't capable of reviewing the film on its own merits. I guess I'm dangerous because I don't take care of children, because I'm not my mother who was a cleaning lady. Because I don't represent the France they want to see.



Hardly a Criminal

The Asocial Network

Argentine Noir, Borges, and the Labyrinth without a Centre

BY CHRISTOPH HUBER

"I am going to kill a man. I don't know his name and I don't know where he lives, I have no idea what he looks like. But I am going to find him and kill him…"

—opening paragraph of Nicolas Blake's *The Beast Must Die* (1938)

"To enter a moviehouse on Lavalle Street and find myself (not without surprise) on the Gulf of Bengal or on Wabash Avenue seems preferable to entering the same moviehouse and finding myself (not without surprise) in Lavalle Street." Referring to the Buenos Aires street traditionally associated with moviegoing, Jorge Luis Borges felt compelled to open his positive review in the literary magazine *Sur* of the recent Argentine film *La fuga* (1937) with this "confession," lest someone accuse him of blind patriotism. Three months earlier, he had not been averse to express his disdain for the average national cinematic product in the same pages: "This film—*Los muchachos de antes,* etc.—is unquestionably one of the best Argentine films I have seen, which is to say, one of the worst films in the world."

An avid moviegoer, Borges was at this point on the verge of a major breakthrough. Following a near-fatal accident in 1938, he began to develop the singular writing style that would bring him international renown. At the same time, a cinematic phenomenon was on the horizon that, in retrospect, would incorporate *La fuga* and many other films, similar in a way to the conundrum Borges formulated in his essay "Kafka and his Precursors." "His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future," Borges observes, opining that the idiosyncrasy (and influence) of a writer inevitably changes our outlook on earlier works with similar qualities; the same applies to a movement such as film noir, a term that gained traction as a description for a certain type of Hollywood crime drama made during and after WWII.

Even as noir has become one of cinema's most popular brands, its exact nature has remained a source of debate, down to its defining characteristics and categorization. Is it a cycle? A genre? A mood? A style? I'll stick by the definition that seems to work for more or less all dedicated viewers of noir: I know it when I see it. And, like most people, I've seen myriads of examples proving that the former designation of a genuinely American style is moot, even as the noir breakthrough originated from passion for a beloved type of Hollywood entertainment and became a cornerstone of cinephilia everywhere by the '70s. Noir's mostly pessimistic worldview was welcomed as a corrective to dream-factory escapism, the romanticism of doom replacing that of happy endings. The fascination with noir as a potentially corrosive hotbed of neuroses and its critical tendencies was regarded as an expression of American traumas associated with the war and social upheavals (cf. the rise of the hard-boiled novel a decade earlier, quickly assimilated into the noir myth), but of course similar chasms had opened all over the world.

Some international influences were detected in noir from the beginning. Foremost among these was German Expressionism—a cultural emigration had intensified in the '30s, as more and more German filmmakers fled from the Nazi terror and found jobs in Hollywood—but just as influential was the French movement that was later to be termed "poetic realism." Long before French critics coined the term "film noir" in 1945 to describe recent American crime films, that designation had been used by the right-wing press during the Popular Front era to decry those "defeatist" concoctions that supposedly contributed to the nation's demoralization, such as Julien Duvivier's *Pépé le Moko* (1937), certain works by Marcel Carné and Jean Renoir, as well as Pierre Chenal's *Le dernier tournant* (1939), the first filmic version of James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.

One is hardly surprised by the conservative backlash against the fatalism and failure that so often characterizes noir, which implicitly defy the reassuring promises provided by most mainstream entertainment, politicians, and marketing. Publishing two then-unrealized screenplays in 1951, *Los orilleiros* and *El paraíso de los creyentes*, Borges and his longtime friend and collaborator Adolfo Bioy Casares note in their foreword that both plots are deliberately patterned on the classic theme of the search, which in ancient books were always successful, whereas "nowadays we are curiously pleased by the notion of a search for something that, once found, has ruinous consequences." The authors invoke Kafka and Melville (Herman), but feel free to insert a noir plot of your choice—the versions of Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*, most famously John Huston's, provide literal examples, as does another famous 1941 film that has been retrospectively semi-noirized, *Citizen Kane*.

"*Citizen Kane* suffers from gigantism, from pedantry, from tediousness. It is not intelligent, it is a work of *genius*—in the most nocturnal and Germanic sense of that word," Borges wrote in one of his select few glowing reviews, and proceeded to invoke Chesterton to describe what he found most "overwhelming" about Welles' film, which can also serve as a good definition of noir at its best: "There is nothing so frightening as a labyrinth with no centre. This film is precisely that labyrinth." In the end, however one would want to define it, noir has always been one of the more powerful and valid expressions of asocial tendencies all over the world, and the genuine article remains so. But the subsequent movement of self-conscious neo-noir, like all emanations of the postmodern era, is something else; one should not forget that part of the allure of noir is precisely that its tales of modern uprooting are told in a classical style that may be imitated with more or less success, but no longer exists in its unvarnished form, as it was washed away during the '60s by the various New Waves.

Even so, the ongoing popularity of noir has led to many retrospective discoveries of an increasingly international nature. You will find 100-proof noir all over Europe—from the Mediterranean, to Scandinavia, even a few Eastern bloc examples—as well as throughout Asia. And, of course, there is a pronounced Latin American tradition, most notably in Mexico and Argentina, whose cinemas had a Golden Age that spanned from the '30s to circa the late '50s, their respective classical periods pretty much ending when the core production of Hollywood noir went out in a crazy fit (and Tinseltown's own Golden Age of classical filmmaking was about to hit the skids).

Argentine noir, in particular, has been a subject of rediscovery and prestigious retrospectives recently; the venerable Film Noir Foundation has helped to preserve key examples, since Argentina itself lacks an appropriately funded public film institution (many key works only survive in 16mm prints made for television). This handful of restored films may be nothing more than a drop in the bucket, given that film heritage is being lost all over the world every second even as we live in a time of unprecedented access and availability, but one should still be grateful: these films have formed the backbone for various showcases in the last few years, from the Museum of Modern Art to Bologna's Il cinema ritrovato to this year's Viennale, which presented a selection of seven rather remarkable films (six on 35mm prints) by five directors. Made between 1949 and 1956, these titles provide insights into some key aspects of Argentinian noir—which, like all regional variants, has some special idiosyncrasies—while also connecting to noir's international development.

Which brings us back to Borges and *La fuga*. First of all, it is worth noting that the film's director Luis Saslavsky, a major figure in national cinema, would go into European exile after being blacklisted by the Peronist bureaucracy in 1949. (Perón—a bête noir for Borges—is a spectre that hangs over Argentine film history in general, and especially the noirs discussed here, as the chaotic end of his first tenure as president in 1955 was one of the key factors contributing to the end of Argentine cinema's classical era.) Emigration of all kinds is an essential trope in all noir, and the real experiences of numerous of the genre's actual creators surely contributed to that overarching feeling of displacement; Saslavsky too evidently carried that over to his new career in France during the '50s (he subsequently moved on to Spain in the '60s), delivering some notable noir-ish work that was crowned by his adaptation of Georges Simenon's *La neige était sale* (1954).

La fuga itself belongs to an Argentine proto-noir tradition that marries a tried-and-true plot (Borges compares it to Chaplin's 1923 silent *The Pilgrim*) with national characteristics: a criminal hides from the police, aided by his lover (popular singer Tita Merello), who transmits secret messages to him via the tangos she performs on live radio. Borges mentions Merello in a laudatory aside, but what he appreciates most about *La fuga* is both the absence of sentimentality and the style, which he praises for following Hollywood's example while also merrily denigrating a Dreyer classic: "The primary virtue that may be distinguished in *La fuga* is continuity. There are numerous films that never go beyond mere photographic anthologies—*The Passion of Joan of Arc* continues to be the mirror and archetype of this much-praised error—and perhaps there is not a single European film that doesn't suffer from pointless images. In contrast, *La fuga* flows limpidly, the way American films do."

There's no better way to describe *Hardly a Criminal* (1949) by Hugo Fregonese, who in the final year of the '40s had just returned from a one-year stint at MGM and shared with Borges a love for American cinema. Brought to Hollywood for the impressive stylistic showcase of his Argentine musical melodrama *Where Words Fail* (1946), Fregonese turned down all script offers and instead returned to Buenos Aires, conceiving a superior noir that connected two recent crime cases: a fraud and a prison break. *Hardly a Criminal* provided him with ample opportunity for remarkable on-location shooting, similar to the semi-documentary pictures by Henry Hathaway or Jules Dassin that were the latest fad in Hollywood noir.

At the centre of Fregonese's film is a simple but ingenious idea: José (Jorge Salcedo), a dissatisfied clerk with a gambling habit, stumbles upon the perfect crime when he learns that the maximum sentence for embezzlement is six years. With half a million pesos stashed away—more than what he would make in a lifetime of his menial work, he notes with satisfaction—he's gladly willing to serve time, but inevitably his scheme is derailed by external and internal factors, leading to an action-packed finale (violent shootout plus car chase, the latter serving as an opening grabber before the main story is related in flashback, a frequent strategy in the films under discussion). What stands out in this superb crime picture is the open disdain for the path of economic progress promoted by the Peronist regime. In a hilarious sequence, the captured José is feted as a hero by cheering crowds whom he mocks to his handlers: "They envy what I did, but they don't have the courage. Suckers!" he sneers, accompanying this exclamation with a gesture equivalent to flipping the bird. But his victory pose proves premature: his coup ultimately brings on his downfall, with a reporter observing, with shades of *Citizen Kane*, "He was hardly a criminal, just another poor guy tempted by money. They never learn."

"A piece of paper with germs on it" is how money is described in the noir classic *Detour* (1945), and throughout his career Fregonese treated it as exactly that: as an infectious, destructive force. Another of the director's trademarks, a vivid feeling of entrapment, is also prominent in *Hardly a Criminal*: Fregonese has a knack for making the places of daily life and work seem just as suffocating as the prison where his hero winds up, offering a premonition of that fate in an unforgettable shot of José uncomfortably trying to keep his balance in the pushy crowd herded like cattle into the workplace elevator, while the voiceover describes him as just another piece of gear in the machinery's grind. Even a childhood memory of supposed happiness is staged with the same acerbic wit: in a scene where a young José triumphantly rides the carousel after snubbing his brother, the children's joy has already been severely undercut by a shot showing the constraints of the horse driving the carousel—an apt metaphor for one's place in the whole system.

Fregonese would soon go back to Hollywood, where he debuted with another fine noir for Universal, *One-Way Street* (1950), starring James Mason as a doctor trapped by fate. Despite further excellent work in the US, Fregonese's own fate was like that of a noir drifter, as he moved on in the late '50s to shoot many interesting films all over Europe before returning to Argentina for a '70s coda. Like Alberto Cavalcanti, he remains one of world cinema's *auteurs maudit*, his filmography scattered over so many countries that no nation can truly claim him as its son.

On the other hand, the filmmaker responsible for the weirdest film in the Viennale retro, *Native Son* (1951), is definitely part of the French canon, despite providing yet another example of noir exile. Born Philippe Cohen in Brussels, the Frenchman Pierre Chenal had several proto-noir successes at home, including *L'alibi* (1937) with Erich von Stroheim and the above-mentioned *Le dernier tournant.* Being Jewish, Chenal was forced to flee to South America after France was occupied by the Nazis, and he soon thereafter embarked on a series of noir-tinged melodramas in Argentina, despite the language barriers (on his first film overseas, Chenal employed an American cameraman who spoke no Spanish whatsoever).

After WWII, Chenal had a brief intermezzo back home to shoot his noir masterpiece *La foire aux chimères* (1946, again starring Stroheim), and ultimately would remain in France, but not before the '50s saw him do some more work in his overdone noir style on both sides of the ocean. Intriguingly, Chenal had proposed to return to South America in order to adapt *Native Son*, which had proven untouchable for Hollywood despite considerable studio interest. Author Richard Wright had refused to compromise his story of Bigger Thomas, a young Black man who hopes to escape Chicago's African American slums when he's hired as a chauffeur by a rich white family that deems itself progressive, but who, through racial fear and unfortunate circumstances, is led to inadvertently kill his employer's daughter. Further guilt-stricken calamities culminate in a manhunt with racist lynch mobs and a trial with a preordained outcome.

Chenal's adaptation is as bizarre as it is fascinating, and not only because Wright himself (well into his forties) took the lead role of the twenty-ish Bigger. The Brechtian puzzler of that all-too-noticeable age disparity is mirrored in the filmmakers' attempted recreation of Chicago in Buenos Aires, which results in stylizations stranger than probably intended—the cinematography, for one, is conspicuously outstanding in mostly studio-bound ways. Yet for all its obvious shortcomings, *Native Son* astounds by depicting material that would have been impossible to include in a studio production in the US, where the film was promptly mutilated and/or banned. Suffice to say that, unlike Chenal's, both subsequent American versions of Wright's book (in 1986 and 2019) omit the novel's most painful turn of events: that the fear spawned by racism ultimately drives

The Bitter Stems

Bigger to kill his Black girlfriend as well. (It seems somehow appropriate that Chenal's *Native Son* is the odd film out *not* preserved by the Film Noir Foundation, but rather by the Library of Congress.)

If *Native Son* constructs an American nightmare in Buenos Aires, two 1952 Argentine releases signed by Carlos Hugo Christensen bring authentic New York nightmares back home. A prolific, if uneven, force in Argentine cinema, Christensen had a penchant for often noir-ish literary adaptations that ran the gamut from *La dama de la muerte* (1946)—a commendable, Chilean-shot version of Borges favourite Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Suicide Club*—to the full-fledged Borges adaptation *La intrusa* (1979), which he made near the end of his career, when he had long relocated to Brazil. By the dawn of the 1950s, Christensen was already riding high on the noir wave: in 1949 he made both *La muerte camina en la lluvia*, a remake of Henri-Georges Clouzot's *L'assassin habite au 21* (1942), and *The Trap*, which was based on an Anthony Gilbert novel that mined similar territory to Hollywood's classic Gilbert adaptation *My Name Is Julia Ross* (1945).

However, neither of those films hinted at the full expressionist streak that Christensen would display in *If I Should Die Before I Wake*, the first of two films that emerged from an initial plan of an omnibus feature that would combine three Cornell Woolrich adaptations. Enlarging one of the planned stories to standalone length, *If I Should Die* transposes a fairy-tale narrative to the present day, as a schoolboy hunts for a serial killer who has abducted a gullible girl from his class; he even leaves a trail of buttons, Hansel-and-Gretel-style, as he tries to rescue her from the boogeyman's lair, in an extended sequence of astonishing darkness that leads to a traumatic confrontation. The mandated glorification of the police at the end—a staple of Argentine noir since *La fuerte de la lay* (1937), in which a police inspector mercilessly kills his own son (another monster that kidnapped little girls)—is contrasted by a first half that makes the doctrinaire school system look no less repressive than Fregonese's prisons. No wonder the boy emerges a misfit, much to his policeman father's chagrin.

The two Woolrich stories that Christensen combines for the second feature, *Don't Ever Open That Door*, feel almost civilized by comparison, but they are no less effective in privileging atmospherics over story. In particular, the second part—centred on a blind woman's attempt to foil gangsters, including her wayward son—does similarly great things with empty spaces and suspenseful silences, once again focusing on what can(not) be seen and creating a mood of exciting trepidation rather than full-on paranoia.

Far from the feverish fervour of Christensen, but made with the conviction of an accomplished craftsman, are the two versions of classics directed by Uruguayan Román Viñoly Barreto. *The Beast Must Die* (1951) is based on the novel written by British poet laureate Cecil Day-Lewis (father of Daniel) under his pen name, Nicolas Blake, which was the first book to be selected by Borges and Bioy Casares for a series of prestigious Argentine editions of crime novels

The Beast Must Die

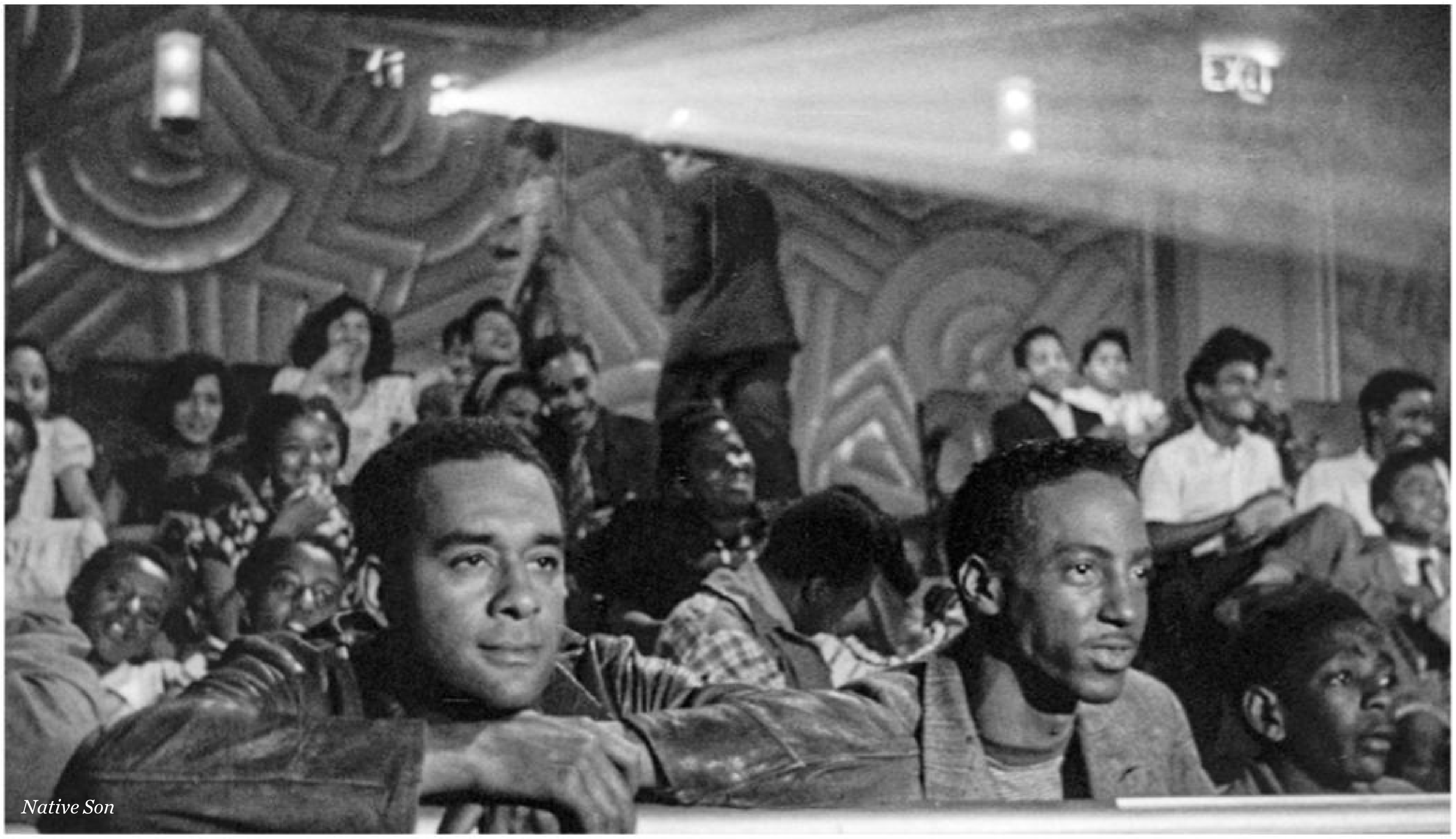
initiated in 1945. The book begins as a first-person account of a writer seeking revenge after his young son was killed in a hit-and-run accident, but takes unexpected turns once the protagonist discovers the culprit: the titular beast is George Rattery, a wealthy bully who makes life hell for all people involved with him.

Whereas Claude Chabrol, with his chilly masterpiece *Que la bête meure* (1969), fashioned a version of the tale that's fully his own, Viñoly Barreto is content with a more conventional approach for his earlier adaptation. Opening with the moment that Jorge Rattery (Guillermo Bataglia) dies from poisoning, Viñoly Barreto sets up a more traditional whodunit that profits from the source's smart twists, as well as a superb ensemble cast (Argentine stars Narciso Ibáñez Menta and Laura Hidalgo were also involved in the writing and production of the film, respectively). A classical Golden Age detection-style film with a piercing moral agenda, *The Beast Must Die* reserves its stylistic flourishes for climactic moments, such as when the discovery of his dead son sends the protagonist into an expressionist trauma of swirling spirals, multiplied images, and floating heads.

Viñoly Barreto's follow-up, *The Black Vampire* (1953), transposes Fritz Lang's *M* (1931) to Buenos Aires, which here plays an unnamed European city (a bit like *The Beast Must Die* plays out in an intermediate Anglo-Argentinian realm). The director indulges himself somewhat more here with some impressive set pieces, starting with the credits that show a figure dwarfed in silhouette staggering over the stairs of a giant building, followed by a Rorschach test that triggers flashbacks amidst clouds of smoke. The film immediately segues into a murder trial, which inaugurates a long flashback doling out the plot by alternating between sewer investigations and drawing-room conversations as the police try to close in on a killer of little girls.

Played by Nathán Pinzon, who had a flamboyant supporting part in *The Beast Must Die* and a small role in *Hardly a Criminal*, this particular child murderer is driven by a different despair than that of the unforgettable Peter Lorre (or David Wayne, in Joseph Losey's underrated 1951 remake of *M*), who sheds a tear after he unwittingly escapes capture by a hair's breadth and is lured to his doom when he finally finds acceptance from a kid. Even more unusual is the focus on the plight of mothers in a patriarchal system—a system that, in the end, retains the right to deadly violence. Ultimately, it is a nightclub dancer (Olga Zubarry) who emerges as the film's unlikely heroine, even as she's subjected to the same social hypocrisy as the insane protagonist.

Fernando Ayala's *The Bitter Stems* (1956) rounded off the Viennale septet by being the sixth movie in a row that centres on the question of whether murder is justified (I'll leave any speculation about what this says about Argentina after Perón's first re-election in 1951 to more authoritative sources). Visually resplendent and cunningly structured, *The Bitter Stems* is yet another film of two distinct halves: in the first, two business partners take the train to a holiday retreat, while flashbacks show how they came together from the point of view of Alfredo Gaspar (Carlos Corez). Alfredo is a disgruntled journalist who has finally found financial success through his acquaintance with a European immigrant, Liudas (Vassili Lambrinos), who has also imported a correspondence school scam in order to finally bring over his beloved family, or so he claims. As the film begins, the initially trusting Alfredo has lost confidence in his partner, and when he buys a one-way ticket for Liudas this leaves little doubt as to where the journey is going.



Native Son

Based on a novel by Argentine journalist Adolfo Jasca, Ayala's film combines a clever exercise in point-of-view storytelling with strong stylistic ambitions (there's a dream sequence that unlocks many keys to Alfredo's psychology that throws down the expressionist excess-gauntlet for all the world to see), and it features a score by Astor Piazzolla, to boot. Changing gears for the second half with smooth assurance, it pulls the rug out from under the protagonist to continue with a barrage of ironic turns that lead up to a finish reminiscent of Peter Lorre's postwar German noir *The Lost One* (1954). Although not quite as bitter as Lorre's masterpiece—ironically, its darkness is mitigated precisely by the allegoric counterpoint of the titular "bitter stems"—the film still showcases all the recognizable hallmarks of transnational noir, staying true to classical style even as its narrative structure points towards a modernist cinema in which the spectator will play a more active role—a development that was probably capped in Argentine noir with *Rosaura at 10 O'Clock* (1958), whose mystery resides in a *Rashomon*-like play with perspectives of different narrators.

While *Rosaura* was directed by veteran Mario Soffici (whose 1939 classic *Prisoners of the Earth* was the only other Argentine film after *La fuga* that Borges reviewed positively), Ayala belonged to a generation that would inaugurate a first new wave of Argentine cinema, with Leopold Torre Nilsson emerging as its most important representative. Ironically, Torre Nilsson had at that point already been the first director to adapt Borges with *Days of Hate* (1954), which the author himself contributed to but later faulted the result, not least because of how it stretched his short story "Emma Zunz" to feature-length. However, when seen today, the 70-minute film plays like a concise precursor of much artistic cinema to follow, even as one can intuit what felt like unnecessary padding to Borges. In his groundbreaking collection *Borges in/and/on Film*, Edgardo Cozarinsky points out that *Days of Hate* is unlike anything in contemporary Argentine cinema, and in fact is closer to Robert Bresson's *Journal d'un curé de campagne* (1951). Torre Nilsson's transformation of a revenge drama into a study of urban alienation—the crime plot becomes a vehicle for exploring the relation between man and society—seems a model for much of what passes as modern art-house noir, just as the director's subsequent studies of decadent bourgeois isolation have been contemporarily rehashed by Lucrecia Martel.

But Borges, who as a writer would come to occupy unique ground on the cusp of modernism and postmodernism through his reading of the classics, remained skeptical about such developments in cinema while he could be deeply moved by the mythic power of a conventional spectacle like Basil Dearden's *Khartoum* (1966). In interviews, Borges even remained evasive about the two films made by Hugo Santiago from scripts written by him and Bioy Casares—the highly noir-ish *Invasión* (1969) and *Les autres* (1974)—even as the latter put into practice the idea for a "pantheistic" film that Borges had detailed in a merciless pan of Victor Fleming's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1941).

Borges' gold standard for cinema remained Josef von Sternberg, who was the only filmmaker he cited as an influence—not for his famous Marlene Dietrich collaborations, which Borges deemed decadent if enjoyable letdowns, but for the silent gangster films that now seem like noir precursors, notably *Underworld* (1927) and *The Dragnet* (1928). The latter, fittingly, is a film now considered lost—as if it had disappeared down a labyrinth without a centre.

The Pyramid of Power

Todd Field on *Tár*

BY ROBERT KOEHLER

After a protracted absence, Todd Field is back, and with a film that more than compensates for the wait. However, *Tár* shouldn't be gauged in terms of some value system based on the number of years that Field has gone without a new movie (16, following his second feature, *Little Children* [2006]), any more than the gap of years between new works by Field's mentor, Stanley Kubrick, should have been a measure for his movies. *Tár* is, on its own and without any context for this particular filmmaker, a gigantic and bold film spilling over with ideas, emotions, and a sneakily transgressive notion that cinema can still express the biggest concepts on the most personal level while delivering a weighty entertainment.

It isn't that Field has just stepped into the batter's box and swung for the fences—though he has indeed done that—but that he has done so in such a precise way. *Tár* arrives at a moment when the art-cinema movie meant to play in larger venues than "specialty" houses, cinematheques, cine-clubs, museums, or festivals is being declared, effectively, dead. With a backer like Focus Features and a star like Cate Blanchett, Field knows that he has a wider range of responsibilities and pressures than fine-cinema artisans who know they will never be in an Oscar race. Given this, his movie is all the more astonishing for its brazen artistic daring on every level, never mind its willingness to run full throttle into the messy culture-war battles over workplace sexual harassment and how these intersect in complicated ways with the long-overdue elevation of women to positions of real power in culture and business.

This is Field's first original produced screenplay, following a filmmaking career in which he's collaborated with or adapted many serious fiction writers, including Andre Dubus (whose story "Killings" he adapted for *In the Bedroom* [2001]), Tom Perotta (*Little Children*), Joan Didion (a political thriller titled *As it Happens*), Boston Teran (his Mexican Revolution novel, *The Creed of Violence*), and Jonathan Franzen and David Hare (an unmade streaming series titled *Purity*). Most of these projects are unmade or discarded (accounting for much of the time in which Field has been out of view), but given that *Tár* is such a notable leap forward from his fine two previously completed features, the sensitive viewer can possibly detect traces of all of that unrealized work in this one. This is particularly true in how the film persistently operates on multiple levels at once, much more along the lines of a novel than a conventional narrative feature. Immediately, in the odd and instantly dislocating opening shot that both aesthetically and thematically bookends the equally destabilizing closing shot, a cell-phone screen image captures Blanchett's conductor-composer Lydia Tár in her seat in a plane's first-class section along with snarky and disturbing DMs about her. Who is sending them? Who is responding? The answer arrives much later, but the point isn't so much to sow the seeds of a mystery, but rather to declare that in the analogue-heavy world of classical music—in which Tár is a superstar—another, digitally driven, online, social-media world is gradually taking over and draining her of power.

For it is power that first defines the character of Tár in Field's conception, and it is this which declares her as a protagonist from whom we might want to keep some wary distance. Nearly every scene in the movie's first half presents a different facet of her Shakespearean-sized character, a highly complex weave of imperious confidence, intimidating intelligence, cultural savoir faire, gnawing insecurities, pernicious bullying, disarming affection, political craftiness, and profound cowardice. When we first see her, in a moment when Blanchett provides a glimpse of Lydia's off-stage jitters, she quickly shifts from a bundle of nerves to skilled interviewee with *The New Yorker*'s Adam Gopnik, whose Q&A intro can be summed up by the Lydia Tár Twitter account: "EGOT winner. Chief Conductor of Berliner Philharmoniker. Forthcoming book *Tár on Tár* available for pre-order now. Certified U-Haul Lesbian. Petra's father." She's about to record Mahler's massive Fifth Symphony as the completion of a Mahler cycle for Deutsche Grammophon, and oh, by the way, overhaul key positions inside Berlin's artistic brain trust, and, later, scramble to try and cover up a sex-abuse scandal with a gifted former pupil who has killed herself. As head of the Berlin orchestra, Lydia has reached the pinnacle of classical music, and she knows it—and, again, Blanchett allows a few moments in which this massively egotistical artist is amazed that she's made it.

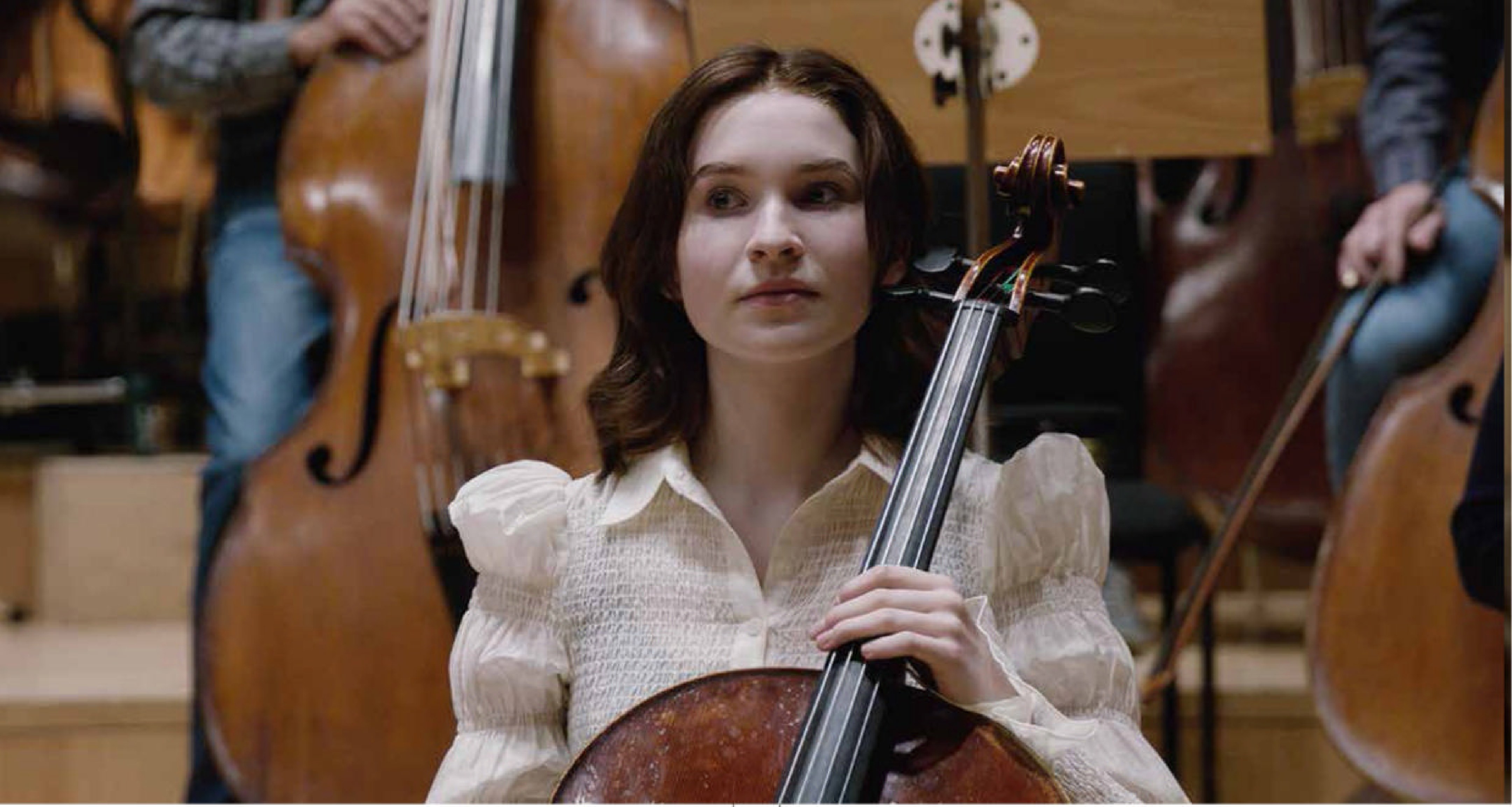
Like everything else in *Tár*, two realities are clashing at once: the outward and lusty embrace of power, embodied perfectly in the form of a commanding, physically strong symphony conductor, and the inward fissures of surprise that she's here at all. The benefits of humility and vulnerability grounding any healthy artistic practice has bled out of this woman, perhaps out of the necessity of imposing her will in her male-dominated profession (something that Field rigorously infers and doesn't dramatize), perhaps more deeply because of severe personal defects. Lydia is not unlike the Berlin home that she shares with Sharon (Nina Hoss), her spouse and concertmaster, and their adopted six-year-old daughter, Petra (Mila Bogojevic): a warren of Brutalist passageways and spaces bounded by hard stone walls and surfaces, and, outside, a grey Berlin sky that's insistently cold and foreboding. Even the manner in which Field frames the intimate relationship of audience seating to the performing stage inside the Berlin Philharmonic concert hall suggests that Lydia is being surrounded, or trapped, or is deluded as to her actual power and imperviousness to outside forces.

This, combined with her hypersensitivity to sound—and the nocturnal disturbances that grow to disrupt her sleep and her subconscious mind, breeding a creeping paranoia—create something remarkable: a wildly contradictory protagonist exposed, through cinematic means, in all her beauty and horror, a perfect subject of a tragic fall from what Field terms a "pyramid of power" where the desired career destination is a hellhole of deceits, abuses, and self-destruction.

Cinema Scope: The viewer might wonder what came first in the creation of the script: the extremely complicated character of Lydia Tár—whose very name is a personal invention, the world of contemporary classical music—or the drama surrounding Lydia. Or was it something else?

Todd Field: It was the character. The character had been haunting me for ten years or more. At different periods, I sat with this character and wondered if I could do anything with it. All of the writing I've done since 2005 has involved adapting existing work, sometimes alone, sometimes with others, which could be fortunately with authors of that material. But this character was always mocking me on my shoulder or standing on my desk.

At the beginning of March 2020, [Focus Features chairman] Peter Kujawski and [Focus vice chairman] Jason Cassidy spoke with me. They had been talking about doing a film that involved a male conductor, and I told them that wasn't something I was particularly interested in. I had agreed that I would write something for them, and they had told me that I could write whatever I wanted. That was hugely liberating, particularly in that moment when the world had just locked down in the pandemic; I wasn't going



anywhere. So, I wondered what I wanted to write about, and there was this character staring me in the face. I thought, "Okay, so she's a conductor." And everything followed from that.

There's an apocryphal story about Stravinsky when he came to Hollywood: everybody came to him saying, "Maestro, you can write anything you want," and he said, "No, I actually can't do that. You have to tell me what you want. Do you want a Symphony in B flat, or do you want a small quartet piece? I need a container in which to pour whatever my efforts are." This was a little like that. It was a good thing to have that form of a conductor, because it was the perfect position to put her in, since her character had to do with hierarchy and power. So, visually—forget about the sound aspect—you have a pyramid of power and she's sitting at the tippy-top. This job provided a good way for me to walk around that pyramid and see how it's formed, and why she's on top, and who's on the bottom, and considering the cost–benefit for being involved in that pyramid. One thing followed the other.

Scope: The role is so huge and dominating—only a Bette Davis or a Glenn Close could have played her in an earlier era. Was it clear to you who would play her?

Field: It was always Cate. I knew that from the beginning. I don't know why. When you read fiction, you tend to make the movie in your head, and you have a composite of human beings in the roles of those characters. You don't really want to be thinking of actors when you're adapting. About ten years ago, Joan Didion and I had been working on a script for quite a while, and Cate wanted to play the character we had in mind for her. We met in New York to talk about it, but that film never happened. Still, out of that discussion, I could tell that she would be an absolutely extraordinary collaborator, so I was desperate to work with her if I had the chance.

That's probably why she showed up the first day I was writing. I had her name on a Post-it on my desk, and said "Hello" to it every morning. When I submitted the script to Focus, the first thing they told me, surprisingly, is that they wanted to do the movie, and the second thing was asking me if I had anyone in mind for the role—they weren't suggesting anyone. I'm a superstitious person, as my children will tell you, and I told them, "No, I have no idea." Focus didn't have a list of any particular actors. Letting me write whatever I wanted without giving any notes or anything was a very unusual situation, to say the least. They were being incredibly generous and respectful, and I was trying to live up to that.

Scope: Can you describe your creative process with Blanchett?

Field: Once Cate said she'd do the role, we got right to work. We were going to be together in Berlin. I turned in the script in July 2020; she read it in August, agreed to it, and then we were going to start in October 2020. We were going really fast. Then there was a second lockdown in Berlin, and we had to pivot since I wanted to film in November, shoot our interiors ahead of time—anything you could see out the window would have to be in November, because I wanted to have that flat sky, the leafless trees you get in Berlin that time of year. By necessity we had to wait a year, because of the weather. During that period of time, Cate made two other films; we also hadn't seen each other face to face in over ten years, so we were just on the phone together just starting to work. We had a year to do that. By the time we got on the ground together in Berlin in 2021, much had been discussed and worked through.

The challenges in terms of what was necessary for Cate to play the role were manifest. She was going to have to play Bach on the piano; she was going to do an American accent; she was going to speak German; she was going to have to conduct. She

would do a myriad of practical tasks just to be able to play the character. The other part was working through who this character was. That really changed throughout the year as we brought on other collaborators, like Hildur Guðnadóttir to compose the score, Nina Hoss to play Sharon, Noémie Merlant arriving to play Lydia's assistant Francesca, and then Sophie Kauer, the cellist that our casting director Avy Kaufman found to play Olga. The conversation was enlarged. We had very talented, very sharp brains.

By the time we got to the point of rehearsing with the Dresdner Philharmonie, it turned out that the only available window for them was at the top of our schedule. I'd originally wanted to do all of that at the end. This meant that we had to do all of the most technical work at the beginning. I would normally have three-plus weeks of rehearsal with my cast before shooting, but half of that was split with an accompanist in Berlin before we went to Dresden, and Cate rehearsing in front of a mirror with her conducting coach, Natalie Murray Beale, and working out the music details with Nina on violin and Sophie on cello. It was a real monster to start with. We all jumped off the cliff together and hoped we'd grow wings on the way down. Because of all of this, the year that Cate and I had together turned out to be incredibly important in terms of having the space to be able to talk about the character, and not worry about the performance and skill aspects that she would have to later have at her fingertips.

Scope: It's pretty remarkable to consider, because the viewer is aware of observing a performance onscreen while also being involved in the story. This is heightened by the movie's extreme attention to the myriad details of the profession and the Berlin institution, down to things like photographing the DG cover.

Field: Well, after all, it is a rehearsal film. We meet Lydia when she's talking with Adam Gopnik in the public Q&A—already, that's a performance. We're meeting someone who's playing a role, and then we see her again, at a lunch, and she seems different here. And then we see her in the classroom, and she seems again very different. By the time she gets home, it feels like Zeus has come down from Mt. Olympus and is just brushing his teeth or something—we're seeing that this person is made of flesh and blood. I agree with what you're saying: there are all these masks that she's wearing, and we see one mask after another at the beginning, so there is a meta part of that, certainly. And when she's standing in front of the orchestra, she's performing for them as well: she's instructing the orchestra, and later, that orchestra is almost like judge and jury with her standing in the box testifying before them.

But I don't feel as much a wonder at the actors' skill sets, because I was too involved with that process. Any actor would say this, that the actor's job is invisibility, in the same way that you shouldn't notice the visual effects.

Scope: The movie allows us to consider how interpretive art is different from creative, or originalist, art. I was thinking after my first viewing that you may have drawn parallels between the interpretive art of acting, from your past life as an actor, and that of performing composed music, as well as the risk of the interpretive actor and musician drifting into a kind of mania—the process by which, say, an actor can lose herself in the role. Did any of this seep into the conception of the character and the story?

Field: It's an interesting question. I understand the parallels between the actor and performer that you're drawing, between an actor and musician or conductor. As an actor, you're interpreting other people's music, so to speak, just as a conductor is also interpreting other people's music. Having respect for the playwright is fundamental for the actor, which can be quite different in film, since screenplays are meant to be more plastic and malleable. But this conductor is dealing with Mahler's Fifth Symphony—that's like dealing with Shakespeare or Chekhov, a foundational text. If you look at the Fifth Symphony, the very first thing Tár is conducting is the funeral march section. There's a clarion call that she conceives as coming from the wings; she's trying to push that call of death even further away from her. There are these wild love themes in there as well—there's a cultural cauldron inside the work, a mixture of different emotions and themes, and there are incidents running through the symphony that she's interpreting at that moment in time. There are different masks in every movement of that symphony, and that's what we're dealing with—we're dealing with this period of time, and she's moving through that period of time focused on those matters.

Scope: The tragedy in *Tár* traces Lydia's fall from the pinnacle where we see her at the beginning, and the essence of the tragedy may be how she loses touch with the artist's inherent responsibility to remain humble. The humility she describes in Bach in the amazing sequence at Julliard, or that same sense when she watches back her recordings of her hero Leonard Bernstein and his *Young People's Guide to the Orchestra*, and how far she's drifted from the original idealism he expresses.

Field: Yes, she stumbled on something as a young person that she saw would be her personal salvation, and she embraced it in a very pure way that brought her joy and made her feel conscious and empowered and that was an escape hatch from her humble origins. It allowed her to summit a mountain that people living around that mountain would never have allowed themselves to imagine because they knew how hard it would be to climb. The problem with her is that she's gotten to the top of the mountain, and the top of that mountain isn't pure: it's a pyramid, and that pyramid is on the shoulders and backs of many other people who keep the promise of that pyramid intact. She's sitting on top of a bureaucracy, and she has to serve that position and that position is political; it can be very cold and very nasty, and a lot of it has nothing to do with making art. It's the Peter Principle, right? She's high enough now to be ruined. She was a great musician and a great artist, but she probably should never have held that kind of power in that sort of place, and that wasn't her goal in the first place. We're meeting her at a particular moment in her life, when she's been doing this long enough that she's drifted into a place that's very different from when she was as a girl watching Leonard Bernstein.

Scope: The ideal of art is how it can bring out our better selves, elevate us, but here we see the opposite. Has making the film affected your view of art-making, making you a little more skeptical of that ideal, or has it maybe reinforced that ideal?

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Field: Well, Bertolt Brecht said that art isn't a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it. I think that's very true. Stanley Kubrick famously said that anyone who's had the privilege to make a motion picture knows what a magnificent experience it is. That's also true. But I think that having that kind of freedom of expression is extremely rare in certain areas, especially when you're being backed by quantifiable forces, as opposed to being a young person doing something for the simple pleasure of doing it.

Scope: You have money involved and greater responsibilities, a studio division backing you, and many people around you. Many livelihoods are involved.

Field: Yeah, that's a very powerful thing, and no matter how much freedom you've been given, there's that reality that never leaves the room. This is where I really envy my fiction-writing friends, who can just sit down at their desk with their pen and paper or computer and that's it. Same with painters or sculptors. This discipline involves a lot more people's lives, so it's a much more complicated business than showing up at your work desk every day. And it's more than what a symphony conductor faces, because you're playing music that's never been played before, and you have a much greater chance of crashing and burning. How do you try to get everybody inside the tent to do the same thing when most of those people are going to leave your film and go work on another film, and another film? You're not handing them Mahler's Fifth Symphony, you're handing them a script you wrote, and they may be rightly skeptical or don't fully understand, and you have to explain it to them properly—all of these things. There's a real challenge in making a film of any size. It's not for the faint of heart. I wish I was cut out for different stuff, because I probably wouldn't make more films. It takes a great deal out of me to make a film; I don't know that I'll ever make another one.

Scope: Another film?

Field: I don't think so.

Scope: You think this is your final film?

Field: Yes, I think so.

Scope: Really?

Field: I didn't think about it until just now. It's highly likely.

Scope: But that's how you feel now. Maybe with some time passing, you might be open to making another one.

Field: I suppose that's possible. I hope it's possible.

Scope: Yes, hopefully. Maybe it's like what Hemingway said, that once the creative well is dry, you need time to let it fill up again. Your film feels like an explosion of all of these things you haven't been able to let out for 16 years, and you let it all out. Maybe the well needs to fill again?

Field: It's not a creative thing for me, it's really more of a physical thing. I spent a year on a daily basis working with Jonathan Franzen, and in six months we wrote 1,200 pages together. That was as thrilling as anything I've had as far as the excitement of freedom of expression, and I'm looking forward to getting in a room with Jon again. The writing part of it, going to the desk every day, that won't change. The reason I went to the American Film Institute, the reason I started directing—people roll their eyes at this when I tell them, but it's how I feel—I was taking a vow of chastity in terms of going into an order, the Order of Cinema, and kneeling at an altar that you've constructed yourself and praying to this deity which is this cinema material, and putting yourself into an insane head space and making people around you totally insane, until a spirit appears. It's a very strange thing to do, and it doesn't come at any small cost to you and the people around you.

That's what I mean: it's not about not having anything to say. If it were nice and easy, I would film all the time. I make commercials all the time, but that doesn't take much out of me. I like the play, the techniques, experimenting with new equipment that comes out before it ever reaches the feature world, because I'm a technical geek at heart too. But those aren't my things; those technical tools belong to multinational corporations. But if something is really yours, and really matters—and it had better matter, for the length of time it takes to make a film—you have to give it everything. And as you get older, you realize how valuable time is, there's only so much time in that hourglass. I'm not in my twenties or thirties anymore—I'll be 60 in year and a half. You start thinking about these things.

Visa de censure n° X

Against Interest

Pierre Clémenti, Filmmaker

BY PHIL COLDIRON

“I love cinema because its images are traces of something forgotten, a lost part of you. Suddenly, in a flash, you are reacquainted with your past…” This, from Pierre Clémenti in his *A Few Personal Messages*, a collection of essayistic journal entries written over the course of the 18 months he spent in a pair of Italian prisons, articulates the Bazinian party line in its sentimental dimension. We are moved by films because, briefly, deeply, they convince us that the past isn’t irretrievable, that life isn’t forever slipping away. But in his usual manner, Clémenti immediately complicates this, narrowing the perspective to an actor’s: “And at the very moment you’re playing the part, you become the person who will one day look back at yourself.” To be an actor, to be in front of the camera, is to occupy a space, weird and uncanny, in which past, present, and future braid into an inextricable whole. To state the obvious, 50 years on from when Clémenti wrote these words, the role of actor, understood as such, now seems all but unavoidable. It's nothing more or less than the texture of modern self-consciousness.

Perhaps we enjoy this, perhaps we don't. In either case, taking up the camera oneself offers a kind of control—deepening the pleasure, or providing relief. And so this is what Clémenti did. In good hippie fashion, he put his irresistible face behind the viewfinder, filming as much as he was filmed, trading mise en scène for mise en abyme, losing himself to find his way. I suspect that, to a sophisticated contemporary sensibility, such an approach to art must seem, if not insufferable, at least hopelessly naïve. But then, this is precisely what Clémenti desired: "I must always be a beginner who is open to all discoveries, and never let myself be locked into a style, a system of habits, or the old collection of ticks that is considered to be a sign of maturity." Or, again: "I painted like a child...And with each naïve image, I made a window through the walls." His belief, finally, was in the freedom to create.

The films which emerged from this belief are resolutely minor by design. His body of work consists largely of psychedelic diary films, on-the-wing images of his bohemian circle, family, street life, protests, film shoots, all seen through the fast, jagged, handheld rhythms first elaborated by the American avant garde. His own face appears often, indicating the communal nature of their creation. The later films begin to incorporate substantial volumes of found footage, both directly and by recording television screens. Shots rarely run past a few seconds, mattes and irises abound, as do superimpositions, both in-camera and out. Filters regularly render the images in harsh, acidic limes and magentas; to modify a line from John Berger on one of Clémenti's countrymen, he clashed his colours together like cymbals, but the effect is surely not that of a lullaby. Rather, they have the look of their soundtracks: odd, cobbled-together quilts of the folky and the far-out, the analogue and the synthetic. Leisure becomes a source of nervy, primal energy.

That these films should be the subject of a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, as they recently were on the occasion of Claire Foster's new translation of *A Few Personal Messages*, owes entirely to Clémenti's standing as one of the most alluring actors of the second half of the 20th century. He was, like Jonas Mekas on this side of the Atlantic, a figure capable of willing a coherent alternative to the dominant modes of culture into being through sheer presence, whether by torquing otherwise conventional films into strange shapes, facilitating the creation of work by a number of the key young directors of his era, or serving as the centre of gravity around which a social scene could orbit. As such, the question of the films' own formal achievement seems, if not irrelevant, then secondary to their standing as evidence of a particular way of life. They are, undoubtedly, *interesting*, a word which might worry us, as it did their maker.

On July 24, 1971, Clémenti was arrested by Italian police on drug possession charges which were, he was certain, trumped up on account of his status as highly visible figure of the counterculture, and he spent the rest of that year, and much of the following one, in prison as a grindingly slow process of trial and appeal played out. *A Few Personal Messages* moves freely between his account of that period—the tedium and media spectacle of his trial, including the appearance of Fellini as a character witness; the lessons in grace and conviction he learned from his fellow prisoners; silent protests and communal revolt, leading to days in solitary confinement; the instruction in painting he received from one "more or less insane" neighbour on his cell block, the brutal suicide of another—and reflections on his life in art, all of which is shot through with a revolutionary perspective which continually links the repression of prison to that of capitalist society as a whole. A typical sentence: "I accepted this period of time and together, with my brothers, we created."

As I've said, creation, understood as a virtue in itself, was his watchword; his conviction here was absolute. And so, at even the bleakest moments, he maintains the serenity that only the deep-

La deuxième femme

Soleil

ly committed can achieve. It is, I think, impossible to untangle the dynamic between this belief and his equally deep, though more obliquely articulated, anti-capitalism. For him, capitalism is a social order that forecloses the possibility of creativity for its own sake, yoking it eternally to profit, accumulation, exploitation. But so too was creativity the thing which, when realized, could "make something click in the human consciousness," as he once said during a roundtable discussion with a group of leading leftist filmmakers of his era, including Straub and Rocha.

Seen from this angle, what Clémenti agitated for, and what his films instantiate, is a kind of folk cinema, one freed from the demands of investment and box-office returns, and made available by the proliferation of cheap, small-gauge materials. He took group inspiration from the cooperative ventures that sprung up across the New American Cinema, seeing in them a vision for the manner in which the working class, whether in the factory or the university, could be brought into contact with films that would inspire their own creative expression. The failure of this model, like many of the attempts to overcome the strictures of capitalism that emerged across the '60s and '70s, should be mourned, but only because much can be learned through mourning. Indeed, much *has* been learned, even as the dominance of corporate culture can seem at a glance to be more stifling than ever. It would be wrong, for example, to follow Clémenti in saying that Straub's films "will always be made for a privileged audience of intellectuals": the internet has made them freely available for anyone with interest and initiative enough to look. Our problem, today, is to find avenues by which to inspire that curious energy.

It's worth considering, then, how this dynamic of inspiration might be manifested through these films. They are, with the exception of *La révolution n'est qu'un début, continuons le combat* (1968), which includes substantial footage from the street fighting of May '68, and the prologue he made for Eduardo Bruno's *La sua giornata di Gloria* the following year, quite far from any of the standard modes of political filmmaking: neither didactic nor discursive, only fleetingly concerned with documentary images of revolutionary action. Rather, they consist largely of images of individuals from Clémenti's social circle, either at leisure or playing out obscure mystical narratives, very much in line with the contemporaneous work of his friend and collaborator Philippe Garrel. Occasionally, as in *Visa de censure n° X* (1967-75), he will overlay revolutionary slogans in text atop jumbles of unrelated images: in the centre of a frame heavily irised in magenta, a superimposition of a brunette woman in a cape running across a field towards the camera and a close-up of a hand opening and closing, when suddenly, as a fluttering red revolutionary flag adds a third layer to the image, there appears in bold, flashing typeface: "POUVOIR A IMAGINATION," "RÉVOLUTION PERMANENTE."

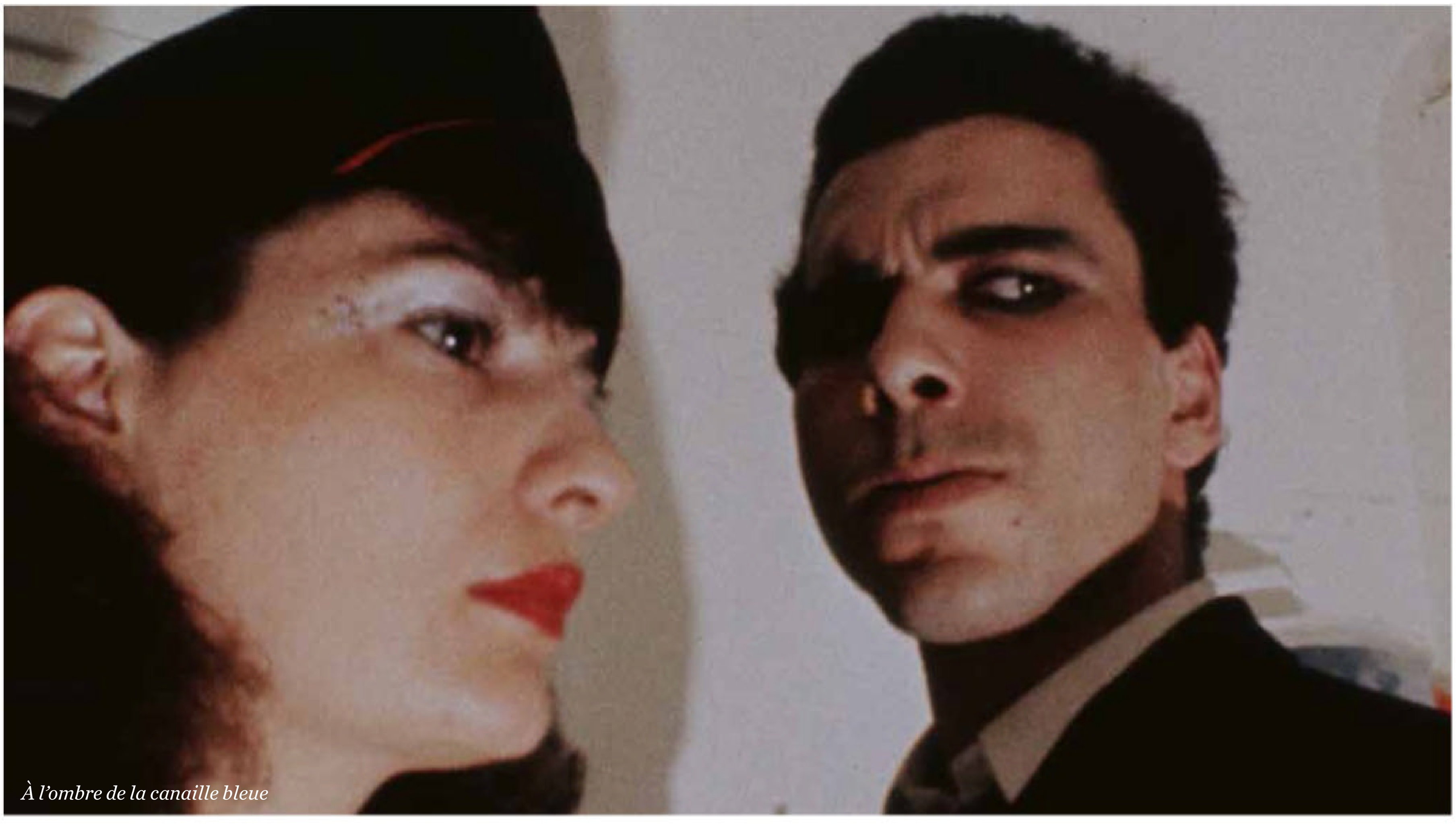
Regular readers of this magazine will, perhaps, notice that I've spent much less time than usual on this sort of close description. This is largely because I don't find that these films reward the kind of interpretive unpacking that their montage style might typically be taken to demand: while the example offered above somewhat clearly brings together three signs of "freedom," in a general sense, it doesn't seem to me to be the case that their specific combination conveys a meaning which is absent from any of its components. Instead, Clémenti's films exist as wholes, compendiums of often illegible images—both literally, given their speed, and as signs which refuse to settle down into any meaning that might be articulated—that congeal into what, in modern terms, we might call a vibe. I want to say that they are attempts at making the energy of his life, drawn from his rejection of the standard social norms and disdain for the bourgeois society of mid-century Europe, as compelling as his own face.

Judged against this high standard, the films are failures. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they fail as discrete objects, *as films*, but taken as a whole, his filmmaking comes closer to success. While I recognize that this may simply sound like an avoidance of criticism, a case of being overly charitable in the name of admirable intentions, I say "more accurate," rather than "more fair" or "more just," for a couple reasons. For one, it's unclear that Clémenti himself ever had much concern with the idea of a film as a unique, coherent object: not only is their content often so similar as to make it impossible to separate them in memory—"Which one is it again where Nico is among the group of bohemians on the boat?", etc.—but he also routinely reuses images across films, a move which has the effect of tying his work into a single constellation.

The second, more foundational, reason is that Clémenti seems to have little concern with the standard criteria for artistic success in the first place: "When people see an underground film, they suddenly realise that they could do the same, or better. And this is the stimulus they need to buy a small camera." In contrast to certain major American filmmakers who were plainly working but also to place themselves at not only the centre of modern cinema, but also of modern art or poetics as a whole—it's surely not a coincidence, for example, that Brakhage places his famous wandering baby in a field full of leaves of grass—Clémenti's aim was more modest, more practical: to facilitate the emergence of a new generation of filmmakers inspired not by his films, but by the fact of their existence. "This is possible," he says. But what that "this" entails is up to you.

All of this makes the sudden turn in his last two films, the feature-length *À l'ombre de la canaille bleue* (1985) and the short *Soleil* (1988), towards relatively overt narratives both stranger and more troubling. The former is a sustained dystopian narrative, a kind of silent film with sound (it was originally performed live, with actors and musicians on stage providing the dialogue and soundtrack), complete with traditionally drawn characters, which charts the descent of a North African immigrant into a series of vicious, sexualized murders, a taste for blood sparked by his violent response to finding his girlfriend being raped by a pair of thuggish cops. As a brutal, immoral social parable, it unexpectedly brings out Zola, rather than Rimbaud, Baudelaire, or the symbolist painters, as the key 19th-century figure guiding his work. *Soleil*, which seems to take place in the same miserable city as the longer film, returns to the montage style of the earlier films—indeed, much of its footage could again be confused with any of them (and again, much is recycled)—but inflects it with both scenes obliquely recounting his arrest and relatively more forthright voiceover narration spoken by Clémenti himself, which together shape its associative imagery into a clear expression of the lasting psychic and emotional weight of his imprisonment.

"Je crains que ma douleur ne vous intéresse." This line, spoken by Clémenti near the end of *Soleil*, returns us to the matter of the merely interesting. (It's also, as it happens, been borrowed by the writer Stephanie LaCava, whose Small Press published the translation of *A Few Personal Messages*, for the title of her new novel, *I Fear My Pain Interests You*.) While, in its local context, this is simple, obvious worry regarding the danger of making one's worst days into art, it applies more broadly to the animating idea behind Clémenti's work as a whole: that an entire life might be filmed, and shaped into a vehicle for inspiration. If it fails, landing only at the level of interest, of cold and detached reflection, then what has one lived for? In this regard, criticism has no purchase on these films. All that matters is whether, having seen them, one picks up a camera of their own and ventures out into the streets.



À l'ombre de la canaille bleue

In the Bedroom

Bertrand Bonello on *Coma*

BY ADAM NAYMAN

Officially, Bertrand Bonello's last three features comprise a triptych about youth, but there's also a shadow interpretation waiting to be made of *Nocturama* (2016), *Zombi Child* (2019), and *Coma* as an extended, eccentric treatise on horror-movie history and aesthetics—call it a self-reflexive Trilogy of Terror. Whatever its debts to *Le diable probablement* (1977), *Nocturama* hewed closer to Romero than Bresson, restaging the late-capitalist tragedy of *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) in a Parisian department store minus any visible zombies, but with the creeping sense of persecution and dread intact. Less successfully, but with true daring, the partially Haitian-set *Zombi Child* walked with Val Lewton and Jacques Tourneur down the path of mordant, morbid post-colonial allegory, waving at *Candyman* (1992) and *The Craft* (1995) along the way. And now, made deep in the throes of COVID lockdown—direct from the director's own home in Paris—comes the skeleton-crew vision of *Coma,* which borrows its title from noted technophobe Michael Crichton and its bad vibes from David Lynch, Kurosawa Kiyoshi, and *Unfriended* (2014), raw materials it duly dunks in a high-speed blender.

That Cuisinart analogy isn't a throwaway, by the way: Bonello is cinephile enough to remember that *Unfriended*—one of the great studio B-movies of the new millennium, and uniquely Deleuzian besides—peaked with a possessed kid shoving his hand in a food processor in the midst of a group chat. He pays homage in *Coma* by having Julia Faure's eponymously surnamed character, a popular YouTube influencer, do likewise during one of her abstruse yet accessible instructional videos. That Faure's ever-deadpan Patricia Coma suffers no apparent injury in the process speaks both to her strangely ephemeral, quietly menacing nature (she's the ghost in *Coma*'s machine) and the crypto-Surrealist ethos of Bonello's film, which unfolds as a veritable nocturama: a guided tour through twilight zones plucked from the collective pop-cultural subconscious. *Coma*'s dream logic is as old as Jean Cocteau, whose famous maxim that "living is a horizontal fall" comes to mind via Bonello's relentlessly subdividing structure and recurrent supine imagery. If Patricia Coma and her bizarro self-help bromides suggest a very contemporary sort of internet Svengali, then Louise Labèque's unnamed, digitally anesthetized protagonist—splayed eternally in her bedroom purgatory, iPhone and laptop at the ready—is a stand-in for her cozily dissociated, habitually doom-scrolling constituency, glued to her screens with eyes wide shut.

Coma opens in epistolary mode, with a long passage of onscreen text (projected silently overtop of the climax of *Nocturama*) announcing the project as a dedication to Bonello's stepdaughter, Anne. It's an overture which obliges us to consider that Labèque is playing a version of same, but either way, "The Young Girl," as she's referred to in the credits, is not a particularly dynamic presence. In making the inevitable comparison between *Coma* and Jane Schoenbrun's recent screen-life freak-out *We're All Going to the World's Fair* (2021)—a movie drawing from a similar well of formal and thematic influences—the major difference comes in the films' respective approaches to character and performance. Where Schoenbrun syncs her film to the erratic rhythms of her doll-eyed pre-teen lead Anna Cobb, Bonello uses Labèque's passive, statuesque blankness as a foil to his own formal gamesmanship.

In the absence of clear ideology (like *Nocturama)* or mythic exposition (as in *Zombi Child*), the backstory of *Coma*'s heroine is reduced to production design and scattered intellectual properties, tchotchkes that mark her as a child of James Dean and Pikachu. The Girl's submissive relationship to mass media, meanwhile, is synecdochized by her fascination with a Patricia Coma–approved device called a "Revelator," which obliges its user to tap out progressively precise patterns of coloured light. The absurdist caveat is that this handheld, battery-operated machine has been calibrated so that the player never loses no matter the complexity of the sequence, a magic trick with disturbing undertones. (Cocteau, again, on the "impeding contrivances" of intelligence: "It brings the little toys which man invents in order to hide the void.")

The metaphor for technology's progressive, seductive sublimation of free will is not subtle, and the sticking point for some viewers may be that *Coma*'s episodic-slash-essayistic treatment of its themes—from ambient technophobia to pandemic-era authoritarianism to various hauntological phenomena—is counterintuitively lucid to the paranoid trance state Bonello seeks to generate. (Not soporific like Apichatpong or mystagogical à la Malick, Bonello is nevertheless aiming for a hypnotic mise en scène—note the black-and-white inserts of eyes, flickering.) Such chiding is, perhaps, a fairer form of criticism than the clueless or unobservant plaint that this rigorously conceived and executed feature (accurately described by Erika Balsom as a "maximalist work made under extreme constraint") is "messy" or "doesn't make sense"; it's also probably preferable to the cheerier but similarly empty-calorie corollary that *Coma* is quote–unquote "batshit" or "insane." Ultimately, it's Bonello's willingness to be direct, not at the expense of his experimental impulses but in league with them, that makes his film so effective—a doodle with the force of an incantation.

Like the majority of COVID productions, from Ben Wheatley's *In the Earth* (2021) to Claire Denis' *Avec amour et acharnement* (2022), *Coma* is littered with recognizable temporal signifiers that threaten to render its contents forever freeze-framed. But Bonello—whose great *L'Apollonide* (2011) was the rare period piece with an original and affecting relationship to time and history—is too smart and restless to settle for making a proverbial "movie of the moment," or to be limited by his circumstances in all but the most prosaic ways. His multi-format, shape-shifting weave of static daytime interiors, mobile POV nightscapes, and authentic-looking social-media pastiche is dazzling, but never weightless—there is, always, a centre of gravity. Drill down deeper through *Coma*'s layered strata of Zoom calls, Instagram posts, Blumhouse homage, and wacky conceptual gags (including an entire narrative strand focused on Barbie dolls whose dialogue includes verbatim recitations, by the late Gaspard Ulliel, of Donald Trump's greatest tweets) and the anxieties being mined about life and death—the latter, to paraphrase Cocteau, suddenly hurrying to meet us en masse—can only be classified as universal.

Back for a moment to those talking dolls, ostensibly manipulated by Labèque as a salve for her boredom (a stand-in for an auteur in lockdown?), but gradually granted their own fluid, stop-motion agency up to and including hardcore, incestuous fucking (the smoothie recipe this time out is Jimmy Kimmel, Todd Haynes, *Team America: World Police* [2004], and the "Rabbits" section of *Inland Empire* [2006]). Once again, though, Bonello's tactics seem less about surfing the zeitgeist than acknowledging and measuring it, a certain knowing, po-mo pastiche being the coin of the realm these days. If the underlying joke in these bits was actually *about* Trump we'd be in Adam McKay territory, but what's really at stake in these interludes is the voracious, pervasive slippage between virtual and IRL discourse, the realization of which drives people ever deeper into themselves and their own private, dopamine-dispensing Revelators as the ground beneath their feet keeps shifting apocalyptically.

Actually, with its closing, widescreen montage of coolly distanced, cosmically scaled eco-horrors, *Coma* does head into Adam McKay territory. We might say, though, that Bonello is less convinced of the efficacy of looking up than his American peer, and surely less concerned with staking his claim as any sort of cinematic Chicken Little (or getting a Netflix deal). Of all the things that stymied the well-intentioned and not altogether awful climate-change allegory of *Don't Look Up* (2021), McKay's fuming futility at trying (and failing) to speak to the mass audience he

used to make guffaw at will was the most baffling. Here, narrowing his address to his next of kin and utilizing an exponentially more private narrative and symbolic syntax, Bonello simultaneously achieves the goals of a good horror filmmaker (to be scary) and a concerned parent (ditto). In a late sequence featuring crudely rotoscoped animation, Labèque sits on her bed recounting her nightmares to an older man who looks suspiciously like Bonello. "Did all that scare you?" he asks, as if acknowledging culpability in his progeny's oneiric ordeal—and maybe her waking nightmares as well. "No, it enlightened me," she replies, adding that the 21st century, with all its apocalyptic uncertainty, belongs to her. "You can't steal it."

Bonello ultimately gives himself the last word in *Coma* via another epistolary monologue, but it's this exchange, shot through with equal measures of tenderness and terror, that clarifies his intention to make not only a film about horror or youth, but also about the horror *of* youth—of staring down a birthright that seems to be receding in the rearview mirror. The Girl says she's going somewhere where free will exists; whether that means the future or her dreams is hard to say, but the wisdom of Bonello's harrowing bedtime story lies in its recognition that the same sunken place that produces monsters is where responsibilities begin.

Cinema Scope: How did *Coma* come about? I know that you had been working on a bigger movie called *The Beast.*

Bertrand Bonello: Yes, *The Beast* is a big feature, an expensive feature, and it's been delayed for many reasons. First of all, because of the schedule of Léa Seydoux, the main actress, and then because of the death of Gaspard Ulliel, who was the main actor. So, it was delayed for like a year, and I decided to not to waste my year and to do something different. Because I knew I was making this more expensive movie, I felt like I could do something very quickly, and in a very free way, with no money. So I wrote *Coma* quickly and shot it immediately after writing.

Scope: Without saying too much about *The Beast* right now, I wonder if it connects to the themes of youth in *Nocturama* and *Zombi Child* the way *Coma* does, or will it be a departure?

Bonello: *The Beast* is very different. When I decided to do another project during the delay, I thought that I was missing a third movie about youth, as you say, and to complete the trilogy. The prologue of *Coma* was originally a short film I had shot during the first lockdown. I got a lot of feedback on that film, which was around 12 minutes long, and I decided to use it as a point of entry—a way to show a young girl, and then to try to get inside her mind.

Scope: Was the idea always to create a short out of footage from *Nocturama?*

Bonello: During lockdown, Fondazione Prada asked a few directors the same question: how can you make movies if you can't shoot anything anymore? We had to think about archives and found footage, so it made sense to use one of my own movies as found footage, and to write a letter to my daughter, who was turning 18. Eighteen is when you're supposed to be entering the world, and yet everyone in the world was staying home. I wanted to think about that a little bit.

Scope: *Nocturama* is also a lockdown movie of a sort: once the teenagers are inside the store, they have to stay there. The outside world has become too dangerous—they're like refugees, or prisoners.

Bonello: A journalist asked me what the difference was between the kids in *Nocturama* and the ones in *Coma.* I said, "Six years." Six years is not a lot, but the world is changing so much that it becomes a lot. In 2016, the youth had a lot of anger, and you could imagine them just going out, breaking things, planting

bombs, stuff like that. Now, they have to sit inside and have their thoughts—their dark thoughts.

Scope: Apocalyptic thoughts, because in the end *Coma* is an apocalyptic movie. *Nocturama* ends with a slaughter, but *Coma* is dealing with the end of the world in some ways.

Bonello: In terms of image, the ending is apocalyptic, yes. But there's also the letter, and in that, I hope there is a kind of light.

Scope: There's absolutely a light, because those images of climate change could, in a different context, feel like the beginning of something. If nothing else, apocalypse is about change. Your film is suffused with a sense of change, creation, and urgency. It feels very contemporary in that way.

Bonello: What I'm trying to say in that last letter—and I'm very sincere about this—is that I trust the new generation. We're leaving them an awful world full of shit, terrorism, economic drama, ecological drama, ever since they were born. But I'm sure they will be cleverer than we were about it.

Scope: The line that moved me the most, as a parent, is where the father figure—who looks like you—is sitting on the bed with The Girl and says something like, "People will say the 21st century belonged to me," and she replies, "No, it's mine, you can't have it."

Bonello: I really like that line too. We have to not tell them what to do and how to do it, but to listen to them and give them attention.

Scope: The father also asks The Girl if the dream she's been having—which I take to be the dream of the film—is scary or enlightening. I wonder if the two are necessarily connected. Change often comes out of being frightened.

Bonello: I think there is a sentence of Nietzsche that says, "Terror is the most beautiful part of humanity."

Scope: I want to ask you about terror and horror movies in a moment, but the person I thought of most during *Coma*—even though you don't quote him—was Jean Cocteau. He talked so much about life as a form of dreaming, and about sort of falling through various realities, which is present in the structure of the film, which just keeps plunging downward through different layers of storytelling.

Bonello: I never thought about Cocteau for this film, but I understand what you mean. I didn't want to try to be realistic, just to offer sensations.

Scope: Those sensations are often very unnerving, and my feeling is that *Coma* is not just a horror movie but sort of a movie about horror movies, which reminds me of *Nocturama* and *Zombi Child*. All three films are very conversant in genre tropes, and even filled with specific references to certain classics.

Bonello: Horror films were the first kind of cinema that I really liked when I was a kid. I think I know them quite well, and was trying to put some of their codes in here. Usually when you see movies about teenagers, they're stories about first love; I try to include other things, like politics, and how young people can participate in their political worlds—in 2016, 2019, and today.

Scope: The group dynamics are very important in *Nocturama* and *Zombi Child*, but they're fractured here; the closest thing you have to an ensemble scene is when The Girl and her friends are on Zoom chat, which of course ends up being very frightening.

Bonello: Zoom is very weird because it's like a split-screen. You're always using Zoom for work, but you're also seeing into people's apartments. You can't see what's to the left or to the right, though—you can only guess or imagine. And then you see somebody passing behind…it's very cinematic.

Scope: I wonder if you like *Unfriended*…

Bonello: Yeah, I like it. And I think that if Brian De Palma was doing a film now, he would use Zoom.

Scope: This is sort of what I meant by horror-movie references: I thought of both *Unfriended* movies during *Coma*, the same way

I thought about *Dawn of the Dead* during *Nocturama*, almost as a template.

Bonello: There were two main influences on *Nocturama*—well, maybe three, actually. They were *Dawn of the Dead, Assault on Precinct 13* (1976), and the original *Elephant* (1989) by Alan Clarke. I don't know if you've seen it.

Scope: It's an incredible film. It's great because it's an example of how something can give no context, but also sort of be all context, in a way.

Bonello: Yes, it's about civil war. There's not a word spoken, by the end of the film, you understand what civil war is—it's just crossing the street and killing someone.

Scope: *Zombi Child* was pretty daring in terms of taking on post-colonial themes, and in reaching back to Jacques Tourneur, who is now accused of being politically incorrect with *I Walked With a Zombie* (1943). That movie is almost 80 years old, and you're playing with some of the same imagery and ideas now, which is risky.

Bonello: I enjoyed the idea of getting back to the real origins of so many zombie films—the ideas and history actually come from somewhere. I wanted to give something back to Haiti, and to deal with that aspect of their culture.

Scope: The possession scenes in *Zombi Child* are amazing, and that's where I first saw Louise Labèque. She's very memorable there as somebody who's inhabited by something else, and here I felt like she was very consciously sort of blank and passive—that was the shape of the character.

Bonello: I think what was difficult for her in shooting *Coma* was that she doesn't interact with anybody, except by FaceTime or Zoom. She's mostly alone on her bed, and still she has to express something very precise. She's very smart, she knows how to feel certain things, and her face is amazing.

Scope: She's a very lonely character, which is why she's so drawn to watching Patricia Coma's show. But Patricia Coma is lonely, too.

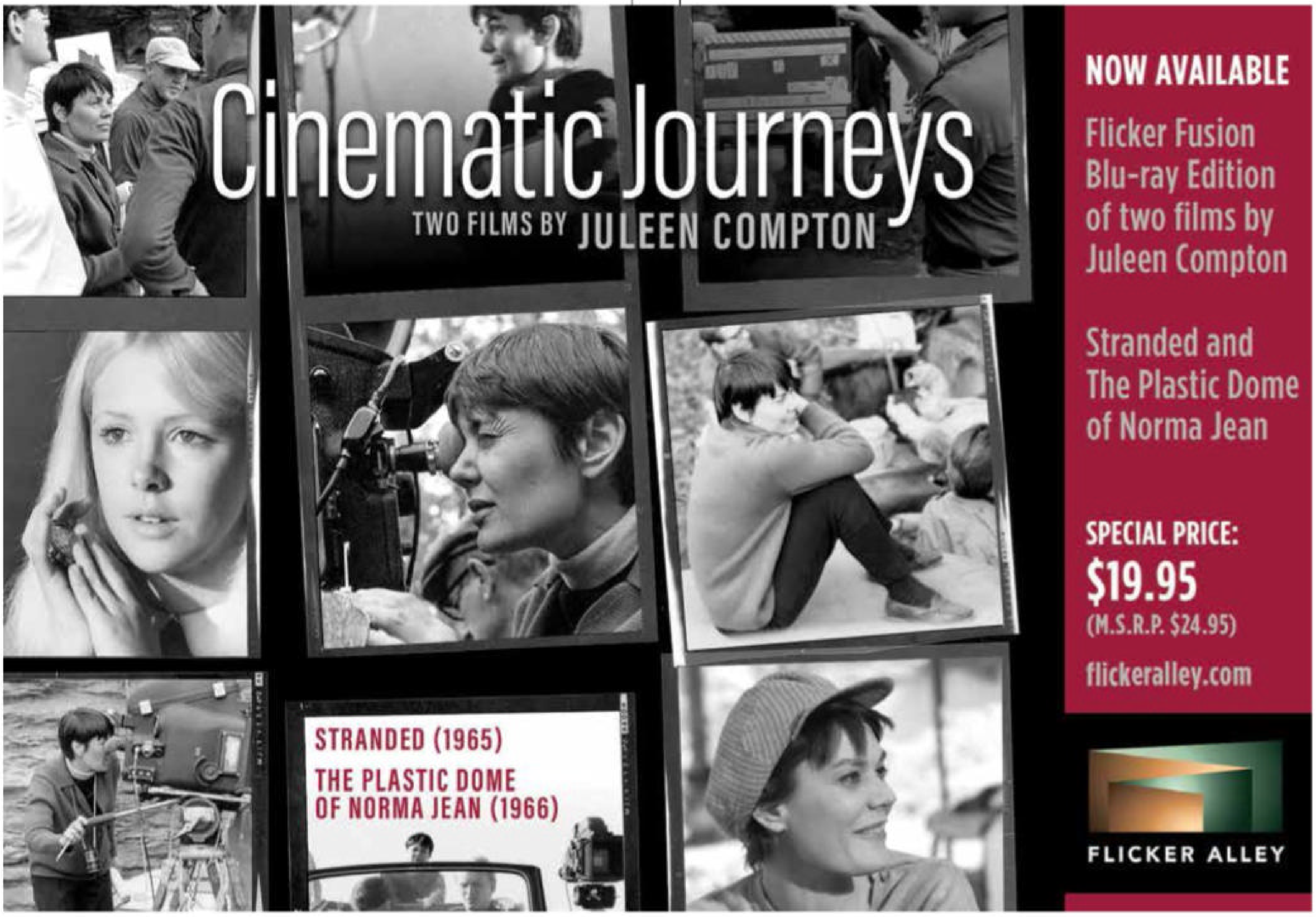
Bonello: Yes, very lonely. She says it late in the film, that she does her YouTube channel because she doesn't want to be alone, which is very normal.

Scope: And it offsets how menacing she is, because there are obviously things about Patricia Coma that are menacing or frightening—or just weird, like the scene where she puts her hand in the blender. Which is a funny moment.

Bonello: I wanted her to be funny, glum, and freaky.

Scope: There's that scene where she's doing the weather report—it's quite Lynchian, being a weather report—and she says it's 71 degrees outside, which is surreal and matter of fact at once.

Bonello: Unfortunately, what she says there indeed might be happening soon.



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Scope: I wanted to ask about the Revelator, which reminds me of playing the game Simon as a kid.

Bonello: We all did! I got very obsessed with the question of free will, which is almost a philosophical question. I didn't want to be too philosophical in the film, so I had the idea of using this stupid...well, not stupid, but this small plastic game that I bought on Amazon to open the door to these huge questions. It's like Patricia says: "You cannot lose, and that's the worst thing that could happen to you."

Scope: How many of the different sources of fear in *Coma* belong to you, and which ones are you trying to imagine on behalf of The Girl? There are so many points of anxiety in the film, and the one that feels universal is the limbo state where The Girl finds Patricia, which is sort of like a first-person video game, just wandering around in nothingness.

Bonello: They're my ideas, placed into the head of a teenager. But limbo...I love the word, I love the idea. It's fascinating to me, whether it's in literature or painting or film. It's not hell, it's just close to hell—it's between things. I love the concept of being between things or states. Life and death, night and day. Hell is hell, you know. Life is life. Here you're between the two, and anything can happen.

Scope: The scenes in limbo are scary, but there's also this unencumbered movement—the only movement in a very static, claustrophobic movie.

Bonello: It's just as Patricia Coma says: "Here you are free." You're almost dead, but you're free, whereas in life, you're not. You're not free.

Scope: Freedom or transcendence in death is poetic, but it's also potentially nihilistic, and a very different proposition for a 16-year-old than an 80-year-old. Like, I don't worry about dying because I'm worried about myself, I worry about not being there for my daughters—or I will worry about it until they get older, I guess.

Bonello: It's true that when my daughter turned 18 or 19, I said to myself, "Well, it's okay if I die now."

Scope: That tenderness comes through in the movie, and then of course some other parts are ridiculous, like the Barbie dolls. I thought about Todd Haynes' *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), but also *Team America: World Police.* Your movie has a similar sort of doll-sex scene.

Bonello: Tell me the title again.

Scope: *Team America: World Police*. Both movies express something about the freedom of just playing with dolls.

Bonello: It's playful, and you can also put things in the mouths of those dolls that you couldn't get away with with normal actors. Same with Patricia Coma, because of the direct address.

Scope: One doll ends up ventriloquizing Donald Trump, but I noticed that he specifically recycles the infamous tweets about Robert Pattinson dumping Kristen Stewart—more teen-horror references to *Twilight* (2008)!

Bonello: The crazy thing is that the tweets are real. I like the idea that the doll scenes start out like some normal soap opera and little by little they just rip into something really crazy and horrible. And what's crazier than those tweets?

Scope: How did you direct Gaspard Ulliel to deliver those Trump tweets?

Bonello: I asked if he thought he'd enjoy doing it. I texted him, he came over, we recorded with a coffee, and that's it. It's how everything was done.

Scope: With all that freedom, did *Coma* change very much conceptually over the course of production?

Bonello: Not really. The final edit is very close to the script. For me, freedom is being able to do both kinds of movies—a $200,000 film and a $7 million film, jumping from one to the other. I would hate to do only $7 million films, but also you cannot only make films that cost $200,000, not all of them.

Scope: You sort of have it both ways in *Coma*, in that the bookends are shot in Scope and feel very big—especially the disaster footage at the end—and the rest is a smaller aspect ratio.

Bonello: The prologue and the epilogue being in Scope—I like using the format that way. It's so cinematic and, at the same time, so intimate, because these scenes are letters from a father to his daughter.

Scope: I heard you said at the New York Film Festival that the visual language of the movie is actually pretty simple if you're paying attention.

Bonello: The "real" of the film is the young girl—we're focused on her, and it's a square format. It's 1.77:1 because that's the format used in computers, and then you have Scope at the beginning and the end. The logic is very, very clear.

Scope: What's tricky is the way you use eyeline matches and point of view. As the movie goes on it becomes far more ambiguous who is watching who, and from where.

Bonello: Yes, especially when we see Patricia in the theatre, watching the girls on their call. There are also those two voices on the video surveillance feed. Where do they come from? We don't know. We're changing POV all the time.

Scope: Has your daughter seen the film?

Bonello: It was a little difficult. She was shy about the letters, but she enjoyed what happened in the movie itself. She thought that it was quite pop, quite sexy, and quite free.

Scope: Did she spend a lot of time with Louise Labèque?

Bonello: Not that much, no. It's a little weird, because there's an actress playing my daughter in my house. They like each other, but they're not friends. It's separate.

Scope: As a rule, do you enjoy talking about or promoting your work?

Bonello: I think it's important. It's getting more difficult to get people into theatres, so you have to try to help the distributors. What's important for me is foreign countries, because I don't want to be dependent only on the French market. I'm lucky, my films travel a lot around the world.

Scope: Would I be wrong to guess that *Saint Laurent* (2014) probably travelled the widest?

Bonello: That's correct, yeah.

Scope: At least until Blumhouse hires you to make a *Paranormal Activity* (2007) sequel.

Bonello: I would!

Exhausted

On Juliet Bashore's *Kamikaze Hearts*

BY WILL SLOAN

Early in Juliet Bashore's *Kamikaze Hearts* (1987), the porn performer Sharon Mitchell tells the audience at her striptease show that cameras and microphones are filming the event for her next movie. After reassuring the audience that they won't be seen, she explains, "It's sort of a surrealistic look at myself and my girlfriend and how we look at the X-rated film business and our relationship with each other." A voice asks: "Is it more truth or more fiction?" Mitchell replies, "I don't know because I don't know whether I'm more truth or more fiction."

Pornography lends itself to this kind of chin-stroking about the line between truth and fiction. It's a genre built on the tension between the documentary appeal of seeing private acts performed "for real," and how stylized and artificial the acts look before the camera. It's also a genre built on the promise of showing its stars crossing that one inviolable line that "real" movie stars aren't supposed to cross. If your job is to reveal everything you're supposed to keep hidden, what do you keep for yourself? Mitchell, who wears nudity like a suit of armor, here calls attention to the artificiality of her persona, and invites us to start wondering what she's really thinking.

Something else this scene does is announce, like Orson Welles at the beginning of *F for Fake* (1973), that we're in for some trickery with the documentary form itself. But while I've seen *Kamikaze Hearts* several times over the years, I'm embarrassed to admit that only when watching its new restoration (now on Blu-ray from Kino after a 2022 theatrical run) did I start to question this striptease scene. It looks like a real venue, but we can't see the audience, and now I realize there probably wasn't one. Maybe it's possible that someone in Mitchell's audience would ask a question as on-point as, "Is it more truth or more fiction?" but the real tell is that the voice is female. I don't know how many women were attending San Francisco striptease shows in 1987, but I'm willing to bet the number was not high.

Shot in vérité style, *Kamikaze Hearts* is set during production of a porn film vaguely inspired by Bizet's *Carmen*, evidently one of the industry's higher-end 35mm productions, but one which the seasoned crew approaches with unenthused professionalism. This production is the backdrop of the film's true subject, the dying romantic relationship between Mitchell and a younger industry figure named Tigr Mennet—formerly an onscreen performer, now serving various behind-the-scenes roles. The couple is depicted mostly in contrast: East/West coast, older/younger, brash/reserved, and an industry legend/someone looking for a way out. "I didn't fall in love with her because she was beautiful, I fell in love with her because she had this power," says Mennett of Mitchell. "When I first met her, I was about to leave, and I've stuck in the business because of her." Though most of the scenes are lightly staged, *Kamikaze Hearts* was built on real issues between the couple. Mennet says of Mitchell, "She fucks off-camera the way she fucks on-camera, so you don't ever really know what's real." Mitchell says bluntly of herself, "I am always a character. I'm offscreen right now and I'm a character…I get paid to wait around between shots. I don't get paid to act—I do it all the time." Though Mitchell carries herself as a veteran, rumours of a drug problem hang over her, and increase as her behaviour grows more erratic.

Kamikaze Hearts was released in 1987, at a time when the porn industry had more or less completed its migration from New York City to San Francisco, and from theatrical distribution to video. At 30 or 31 (an accurate birth year is difficult to pin down), Mitchell was an industry lifer whose filmography stretched back far enough to include Gerard Damiano's *Odyssey: The Ultimate Trip* (1977), Radley Metzger's *Barbara Broadcast* (1977), and other stabs at artistic ambition from the late "porno chic" era. *Kamikaze Hearts* takes place in the long period between then and the current-day online pornotopia, when pornography was a multimillion-dollar industry that was still small, legally murky, only available behind the curtain at the video store, and denuded of any sense of counterculture cool.

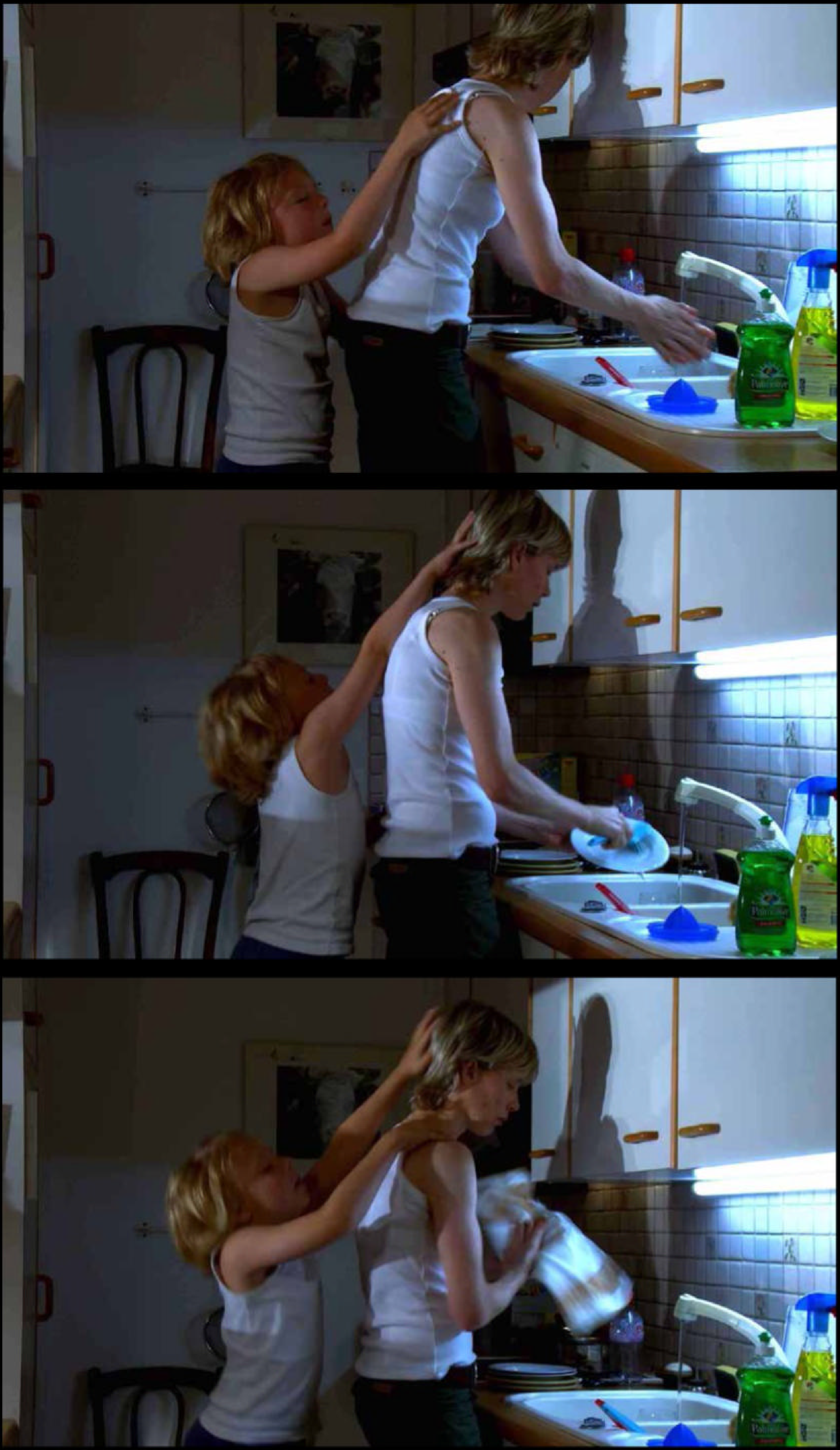
In the '80s, the porn-world figures who bubbled up into the mainstream were the ones whose stories depicted the industry as bleak and predatory. Linda (Lovelace) Boreman released her hair-raising memoir *Ordeal* in 1980, framing her participation in *Deep Throat* (1972) as the culmination of a years-long campaign of sexual abuse and coercion at the hands of her pimp husband. Other crossover media figures included Traci Lords, who in 1986 was revealed to be underage in most of her films; Shauna Grant, whose suicide in 1984 rocked the industry; and John Holmes, whose mysterious involvement in the Wonderland murders made headlines. Boreman's cause was picked up by second-wave feminist figureheads Gloria Steinem and Andrea Dworkin, who along with Bonnie Sher Klein's classic anti-porn documentary *Not a Love Story: A Film About Pornography* (1981) effectively set the terms of public debate on pornography for the decade. Their efforts complemented those of Reagan attorney general Edwin Meese, whose 1986 "Meese Report" emphasized the industry's mob-world ties and made damning speculation on its social impacts.

I'd like to put *Kamikaze Hearts* in conversation with two other porn-world documentaries from opposite ends of the '80s, both products of the industry itself. The first is *Exhausted: John C. Holmes, the Real Story* (1981), a cinematic mash-note to the 13-inch superstar. Best known today as the primary inspiration for Paul Thomas Anderson's *Boogie Nights* (1997), it featured Holmes playing himself as a 40-karat movie star, pontificating grandly on his life and artistry. By the time *Exhausted* arrived in theatres, the smiling bozo onscreen was a fugitive from justice. Like the Holmes of *Exhausted*, the Sharon Mitchell of *Kamikaze Hearts* is an aggressively self-confident presence who seems like she could deflate with the slightest prick.

The porn set in *Kamikaze Hearts* is run by a loudmouth director who gets in a fight with his leading man over salary, but otherwise comes across as a normal, fairly dreary, decidedly un-erotic workplace. In fact, this film-within-a-film is a fake—there was no *Carmen* porno, and the production was staged for Bashore's camera. However, its ambience corresponds to the sort of set that led prolific performer Jamie Gillis to launch the "gonzo" movement. In the book *Pure Filth*, Gillis wrote of one West Coast set, "There was no real sex going on—just a group of people wondering who they had to fuck so they could get paid and go home. I wanted to liven things up." The result was the pioneering *On the Prowl* (1989), also memorably referenced in *Boogie Nights*, in which Gillis picked up San Francisco passersby and invited them to become porn stars in the backseat of his limo. Gillis' amateurs often fumbled and embarrassed themselves onscreen, and this was the point—to call attention to the sanitized unreality of mainstream porn. Gillis, it should be said, had a sadistic streak, and his pursuit of "truth" led him down a dark rabbit hole of underground scat- and violence-themed videos where he spent the rest of his life.

If *Exhausted* possesses any "truth," it is in the campy cognitive dissonance of watching a hagiography about a man days away from rock bottom. The more artful and self-aware *Kamikaze Hearts* also generates tension between its star's gregarious, self-possessed affect and her deteriorating professional and personal surroundings. But unlike Holmes, Mitchell eventually chooses to puncture the fantasy. In the harrowing final scenes, Mitchell and Mennett have an extended argument that begins with them showering at the end of the shoot. For Mitchell, there's nothing revealing about mere nudity; the only way she can really be naked on camera is to inject cocaine on camera—which she and Mennett do, reportedly for real.

Kamikaze Hearts doesn't contain a lot of surprises: the toxic relationship is toxic, Mitchell is trapped, and Mennett is trapped with her. Yet I've returned to the film several times since I first saw it over a decade ago, and it lives in my mind on the shelf labelled "Great Movies." After shooting up, Mitchell says to the camera, "This is fuckin' real," but what have we gained from watching this "reality?" Nothing more or less than what's in front of us: a person trapped under several layers of artificiality, trying desperately to communicate something real. Like *On the Prowl*, it's a bleak vision of truth, and not one that points to any kind of positive way out, but there is feeling behind it, and it is powerful. Take it or leave it.



A Life of Love and Adventure

Laura Citarella on *Trenque Lauquen*

BY JORDAN CRONK

About 30 minutes into Laura Citarella's first feature *Ostende* (2011), a waiter named Paco (Julián Tello) asks one of his customers, Laura (Laura Peredes), if he can tell her an idea he has for a movie. As Paco explains, the film will begin at night, with a man in a yellow truck approaching a desert crossroads. To the left, a fire; to the right, darkness; and, in the distance, screams. Concerned, the man drives toward the blaze, where he comes upon a group of priests and a mysterious Dutchman conducting a grisly ritual involving torture and a burning car. When he attempts to leave, the man is knocked unconscious. The screen then cuts to black and the title card appears. "And then...?" asks Laura. "And then what?" Paco replies. "The story...what happens next?" Laura implores. "Oh...that's all I got," Paco responds. "I don't want to put too much pressure on it."

As a plot point, Paco's story is largely inconsequential to *Ostende*'s greater arc—which otherwise follows Laura as she happens upon a potential mystery involving an old man and two young women staying at the same hotel as her in the Argentine resort town of the film's title—but it's instructive when considering Citarella's own approach to storytelling, which favours ellipses, red herrings, rug-pulls, and the occasional dead end. As a member of El Pampero Cine, Citarella has been a key figure of the New Argentine Cinema movement, having produced a majority of the collective's most internationally renowned projects, including Mariano Llinás' *Historias extraordinarias* (2008) and *La flor* (2018). Like those multi-hour epics, Citarella's films betray a keen interest in genre and the elasticity of cinematic storytelling—and, until now, have done so at a fraction of the scale. *Trenque Lauquen*, Citarella's two-part, 250-minute feature, pushes these predilections beyond the bounds of anything she's previously attempted, and, just as impressively, makes a case for itself as a monument on par with any of El Pampero's earlier achievements.

Both a belated follow-up to *Ostende* and a sizable recapitulation of its core themes and ideas, *Trenque Lauquen* pivots from the coastal confines of the earlier film to the expansive pampas of the eponymous province, catching up with an older, wiser Laura (played again by Peredes), whose youthful desire for adventure and intrigue has finally cleared a path for her to become the protagonist in a story of her own design. As the film opens, Laura, a botanist on the verge of classifying an ultra-rare flower, has disappeared with little trace; her boyfriend, Rafael (Rafael Spregelburd), and colleague, Ezequiel (Ezequiel Pierri), are searching the city and neighbouring towns for her by car, but with each subsequent stop their individual interests, motivations, and theories concerning Laura's whereabouts become increasingly muddied. All she's left is a cryptic note, which Ezequiel finds on Rafael's windshield but keeps to himself: "Farewell, farewell, I'm going away," it reads, offering the first of many compelling clues that Citarella will divulge in thrillingly creative fashion across the film's 11 subsequent chapters.

Credited to Citarella and Peredes, *Trenque Lauquen*'s script unfolds with the freedom and scope of a novel, taking cues from the likes of Borges, Bolaño, and Casares as story threads pile up, circle back on one another and eventually fall away, only to sprout new narratives in their place. As such, the film assumes many forms across its extended runtime: a mystery, a romance, a road movie, a period piece, even a sci-fi parable. In the first of many flashbacks, each told from the perspective of a different character, Laura tells Ezequiel about a clandestine correspondence that she's uncovered between a married Italian man and a mysterious Argentine schoolteacher named Carmen Zuna; hidden in books, these love letters and their roundabout path to discovery act as one possible explanation as to Laura's disappearance—at least for Ezequiel, who prefers to imagine himself and Laura in the lead roles of this epistolary romance. Befitting its shapeshifting nature, *Trenque Lauquen*—which was shot over a period of five years with three different cinematographers—is nearly impossible to pigeonhole; it's no wonder Citarella frequently likens it to a rhizome, as few recent films have applied the techniques of classical storytelling to such labyrinthine ends.

Trenque Lauquen is a work replete with madeleines and motifs, mostly of the material or musical variety. (There's even a clever callback to *Ostende*, in the form of Laura's instantly recognizable ringtone.) Radio plays a crucial role in this regard: not only does it broadcast the songs that serve as quasi-themes for many of the characters, but Laura's voice—absent her body for long stretches of the film—can be heard over the airwaves in interview segments she does on local radio. In one of these conversations, Laura learns about Elisa Esperanza (Elisa Carricajo), a doctor investigating the origins of a strange creature that has washed up on the lakeshore. (Like Peredes, Carricajo is a member of the Piel de Lava theatre troupe, a quartet of actresses who regularly participate in El Pampero productions, including, most prominently, *La flor*.) Told from Laura's point of view, this final story, recounted in an audio recording left for Ezequiel, leaves no doubt as to the film's investment in words and the moments they can so powerfully illuminate in the mind's eye. It's here where the radio station's slogan, heard throughout the film, is perhaps most instructive: "Radio is a blind media, until you watch with your ears." Indeed, in a film with no shortage of striking images, it's the stories—and the words that bring them to life—that leave the most lasting impression.

Cinema Scope: El Pampero Cine is now 20 years old. Can you tell me a little about its history, and perhaps how it's grown or developed between its earliest productions and *Trenque Lauquen*?

Laura Citarella: El Pampero began with Mariano Llinás' first film, *Balnearios* (2002). At that time, Mariano, who was my teacher at university, was working on his own, but he was interested in the idea of forming a group. He actually asked me to be a part of *Balnearios* but I said no, because, being in my twenties, I was studying and wanted to participate in different kinds of projects and also explore the industry side of things. So Mariano started El Pampero with Agustina Llambi Campbell, the producer of many of Santiago Mitre's films. Mariano and Agustina are friends, but that creative partnership didn't work out, so that's when Alejo Moguilansky, Agustín Mendilaharzu, and I got involved. But even then I didn't want to get *too* involved. I thought I'd be "compromised" by being involved in just this one project—and I did go on to direct a short film, *Historias Breves V: Tres juntos* (2008), with the help of the INCAA (Argentine National Institute of Cinema and Audiovisual Arts).

It really wasn't until *Historias extraordinarias* that we decided to be an official group. This was the big moment when the four of us decided to produce films together in an independent and ambitious way. That's when the group solidified, though we have included and worked with many other people over the years. The main idea behind El Pampero has been to construct a unique production system for each film. For example, after *Historias extraordinarias* won a prize at the Miami Film Festival we decided to make Alejo's film, *Castro* (2009), and shoot it in 16mm and in just two months, as opposed to the two years that it took to make *Historias extraordinarias*. And rather than work with INCAA, we look for funds and support from institutions that don't ask us to change the script or go to a lab or workshop, in an effort to keep the films as free as possible.

Scope: Has it been difficult to maintain this independence over the years?

Citarella: Yes, it has. But it's also a decision. There are many directors in Argentina who started out making very low-budget films, but with the goal of one day reaching another level. For us, we want to keep making films at this level, with this level of control. A lot of people think that the "natural path" is to start as independent and then move to another structure, but that's not our goal. We developed this way of making films because we prefer this way of making films—it's not like this is the path to something else.

We're more like a family or a rock band than a company. We try to work with young people who might have other jobs, but can learn how to produce in the way that we produce. We have our own equipment, which probably isn't very high-tech compared to whatever the industry standard is. We don't use Alexas, we have Canon 7Ds—cameras that most people use to shoot photographs—that we can take from our office when we need them. We don't have to wait for a rental or a camera crew. This way of producing is easy and fast, and I think it gives the young people that work with us a model for how to make their own films. A lot has changed over 20 years, but we've survived because we know how to work in this way, which is a way that most directors don't normally work. We don't follow whims. If you do that it can begin to work against the film, because you can lose a lot of time and money pursuing whims. There are a lot of superstitions in cinema, both economical and technological, that we don't subscribe to.

Scope: What about the development of your own filmmaking? You're primarily known as a producer, and seem to only direct when the time and project is right. Is directing something you always eventually wanted to pursue?

Citarella: I made short films in university, and I had the experience of making *Tres juntos* while producing *Historias extraordinarias,* and at the moment I wanted to continue to direct, but I have a certain facility for producing. It's something that I do naturally; it's in my blood. When you're producing films like *Historias extraordinarias* or *La flor*, it's a very different experience than producing within the industry. When you're a producer of a big film, you're responsible for the money and for the people—you do all the dirty work. You're not considered a creative person, and as a result it feels like the films don't belong to you. It's like you're a tourist on your own project. That's why when most people leave university, they don't want to be producers. Being a producer is like being the manager of a bank or something.

But when I decided to work with Mariano, who has a very different way of thinking about production—and who is a producer himself—we conceived of a way of producing that allowed for more creativity. It's not just about having numbers in an Excel file—the producer can have a lot of input with the person directing the film. Traditionally, if a film fails, or if there's an issue during or after shooting, it's the producer's responsibility. For us, if there's a problem, it's everyone's problem, and everyone thinks how to solve it. Because of this, the production functions in a more active way. I always say that producing is like engineering: you have to work with ideas, not with numbers. I didn't want to be that traditional producer who acts like the director's therapist, or one that goes to festivals and speaks for the director, who is off being exalted as a creative genius. I feel like a good job is one where you're part of the bigger process, where you can experiment outside your given role, and where there's not much differentia-

tion between the producer and director. It should be a fusion of the two, working to bring different ideas and different images to the world.

That said, as a producer, you still have to deal with a lot, and sometimes you can get a little burned out. So that's why I decided to direct *Ostende*, with the encouragement of Mariano, while also still working as the producer of the film. For me, the two activities are impossible to separate. For example, in *Trenque Lauquen*, which is full of complicated scenes that posed many production problems, I couldn't say, "I need to think about this scene, someone else deal with the production problem." For me, it all operates in the same head space.

Scope: I'm curious about *Trenque Lauquen*'s relationship with *Ostende*. Other than the Laura character, how do you feel the films relate to each other, and did you always conceptualize the new film as a follow-up to the earlier one?

Citarella: By the time we finished *Ostende* we were already at work on *La flor* and Alejo's film *The Parrot and the Swan* (2013). But even then, I felt like I could have somehow done better, which is how I always feel after finishing a film. Your point of view changes as time passes. In fact, we even shot and added a scene to *Ostende*—the scene where Laura sees the old guy while eating breakfast—after the film premiered at BAFICI. That's one way to understand how we work: we work so fast and with such a small group that it's possible to do something like that. In the case of that scene, we felt like we needed to establish a greater sense of danger for Laura's character, who in the initial version of the film had no scenes with the old man character.

So I always felt like there was more to explore with *Ostende*. To be a filmmaker you need to try things, and shoot films. So I thought the best way to make *Ostende* better would be to make another version of the film, something similar and also a part of it, but hopefully something better due to the years of experience Laura Peredes and I have built up in the interim. I knew that if I applied the same ideas to a film ten years later, I'd have completely different results. It's that idea of a filmmaker always making the same film, the difference being, of course, that the filmmaker also changes over time, and so the films become other things.

Scope: One of the descriptions of *Ostende* notes how the film "oscillates between two ways of thinking about cinema," an idea that seems to extend to *Trenque Lauquen*'s various storytelling approaches.

Citarella: Yes, but in *Trenque Lauquen* that idea is maybe not so clear-cut. *Ostende* basically evolves from a comedy to a kind-of thriller. We always said it was part Rohmer, part Hitchcock. In *Trenque Lauquen* you have the romantic story of Ezequiel and Laura, and also the romance in the letters, but then you have a detective-type plot and also a sci-fi story. So it's a similar approach, except that rather than proposing two possibilities for the cinema, in *Trenque Lauquen* there are a lot of possibilities. By trying to make a film in similar terms to *Ostende*, something else happened: a mutant film appeared, a plural idea of cinema. I like that *Trenque Lauquen* can't be classified, that you can't say the film is going this way or that way, or even that the film is this or that. It's always trying to outrun this idea of being classified—it's like the experience of reading a novel that takes a rhizomatic approach to storytelling, where each chapter proposes something new and mysterious.

For me, the difference between the two films is that in *Ostende*, Laura is someone who wants to have a lot of lives—to live in fiction—but ultimately decides to go back to her normal life with her boyfriend. In *Trenque Lauquen*, Laura lives all those possibilities, and finally gets lost.

Scope: Did one story in particular initially spark the idea for the film?

Citarella: Not one story exactly, but one idea: what happens when a woman wants to leave her life? If a woman is seen walking alone in the middle of the woods, what will people think? Usually, they'll think that she's crazy or that she's in danger. No one thinks that she's there because she *wants* to be there. The Rafael character, for example, is always trying to find the logic behind Laura's decision to leave. In a way it's guilt, but he also behaves very matter-of-factly, acting like he *has* to find her. Same with Ezequiel in the second part: when he meets Juliana, she says, "How do you know she wants to be found?" Like, who told you that? I wasn't especially interested in making a comment on women or feminism, but of course there are some questions related to those things that arise organically in the film that are interesting. If a guy goes away, no one will ask the same questions as they would if a woman goes away. There's something in that idea that interested me in terms of fiction, which brought me back to *L'Avventura* (1960). I always liked the idea that the woman in that film disappears because she doesn't want to be there, and you *feel* that she doesn't want to be there. You don't know what happens to her, and maybe you don't care, but you know she doesn't want to be there. That's the motor for all the fictions in *L'Avventura*.

Scope: Can you tell me about the town of Trenque Lauquen, and why you decided to set the film there? Are there certain fantastical stories associated with the town, like we see in the film?

Citarella: It's the town where my family comes from. I was born in La Plata, but I spent summers in Trenque Lauquen. My grandmother lives there; my parents are from there. It's a place that I love, and where I spent a lot time. I feel comfortable there. If I want to shoot a scene in, say, a bar, I can just call the bar and they'll let me shoot there. It's easy and natural producing there.

Apart from that, it's also very Antonioniesque—the landscape, the big pampas. The city is designed around these long streets and boulevards, which gives it a space-y feel. It's a bigger town than it used to be, but it still has the texture of a small town. So, no, none of these stories are inspired by events that happened in Trenque Lauquen, but each location—the library, the bar, the lagoon—helped us when writing the script, which we designed around the settings.

What's perhaps most unique about Trenque Lauquen is how the people deal with news and with gossip. That's why radio plays such a big role in the film, and why a lot of newspaper headlines are seen: because if something happens in Trenque Lauquen, everybody will be talking about this subject and everyone will be concentrated on only this one thing. And then, one day, they'll just stop. You see it in the film with the story of the creature in the lagoon, which is identified as multiple things throughout. This way of behaving and dealing with rumours is something I always wanted to depict, which is what led us to this more sci-fi or fantastical story thread in the second part.

Scope: There is something vaguely old-fashioned about the ways these stories are disseminated in the film.

Citarella: Yes. For me, living in Buenos Aires, I read the news on the internet or on Twitter. They don't use Twitter in Trenque Lauquen—or maybe some people do, the younger people. But there are no young people in Trenque Lauquen: most young people move to Buenos Aires for university or whatever, and never go back.

But that's interesting you say that, because when we started shooting in 2017, that radio station was operational—in fact, it's where my uncle, who plays Rolo in the film, had a program for many years. But after the pandemic the radio station was demolished. We actually had to build a radio station set in the El Pampero office just to finish those scenes, because the station is no longer there. Same thing with the newspaper-printing office: we shot some scenes there early on, but by the time pandemic restrictions lifted, the printer shut down. Now they're trying to print the newspaper in some cheaper way, and promote the digital edition. We arrived just in time to capture this old way of life. So when you ask me why I wanted to set the film in Trenque Lauquen, that's another reason: it was a way to portray a place that is disappearing.

Scope: Considering Laura's relationship with her character in the two films, it feels natural that she would help write the script for the new one. How did you two decide she would be a co-writer, and what was the writing process like?

Citarella: I made two films between *Ostende* and *Trenque Lauquen*: *La mujer de los perros* (2015) and *Las poetas visitan a Juana Bignozzi* (2019), both of which were co-directed. Based on those experiences, I knew I didn't want to go back to working on my own. And like you say, since Laura is the character, it was easy for us to come to the decision. Laura is a playwright and theatre director, she's not only an actress. We would write the scenes and suddenly she'd be reading the scenes to me as the actress who would be performing the role. It was the same with my husband, who plays Ezequiel in the film: I would write his scenes at home and ask him to read them to me. But with Laura, it was especially helpful for me to more fully understand the character.

I wrote the initial outline for the project, and then Laura joined to help develop the script. We then shot for two years, were delayed by the pandemic, and during that time decided to restructure the film. Initially it was much more linear: for example, the first chapter with Rafael and Ezequiel searching for Laura was initially near the end of the film. Once we made this decision to restructure the narrative, it expanded the scope of the film and we had to write more scenes, particularly for Rafael and Ezequiel. So Laura came back and helped write these scenes and work out the restructuring. And even when she wasn't there, I would call her all the time and ask her what she thought about this or that idea. She was more like a partner than just a writer or actress.

Scope: Can you tell me a bit about the influence of literature on the film? Even more than cinema, *Trenque Lauquen* feels very indebted to various culturally specific storytelling traditions.

Citarella: Some people have told me that it plays more like a novel than a film. It does have that kind of structure. Something was happening to me with books when I first started writing the film: I was reading a lot of science fiction, and I would start reading something by, say, Ursula K. Le Guin, and that would bring me to *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley, which would then take me to Shelley's mother, who was a feminist, and her work would take me to Lord Byron, and on and on. So you start making this big map of books. And maybe you don't even finish the books. I'm sure something similar happens to you when watching films: you see that the editor of one film directed another, and then you watch that film, and so on. This process is really reflected in the letters in the film, which take Laura down a rabbit hole of books. Also, when I was brainstorming the film, and buying all these used books, they would arrive with all sorts of notes in the margins from previous owners. I was fascinated by this process—for me, that's the film's main relationship to literature. It has more to do with the process of reading than with books themselves: the idea of reading as a map, or a big expansion, a rhizome.

As for authors, there were of course some specific names. I was reading a lot of Bolaño, for example, who has this way of not finishing mysteries but instead starting another one, and then another one. This is a way of experiencing a story that I feel is closer to literature than cinema, and that's one reason, when discussing the film, I try to speak not about books but about the experience of reading literature. In a Q&A the other day, a guy told me that there's something frustrating about these unresolved mysteries in the film. He used that word: frustrating. And I said, yes, it's because as viewers we're getting used to the structure of TV series, or mainstream films, which are always trying to close or resolve what they've started—they're constantly trying to put everything in a box. In a way, *Trenque Lauquen* is going against this idea. In the black hole between mysteries, the audience can have their own ideas about what is happening. I think that's something also related to literature.

Scope: I'm interested in the film's bifurcated structure, which seems perhaps less to do with length than with theme or genre. Can you talk about differentiating the two parts while maintaining a consistent tone?

Citarella: Like I mentioned, the film was initially much more linear. I remember when we wrote it, Mariano said, "This will be a very long film." And I said, "No, it's not going to be long. I don't make long films like you!" But then, of course, once we decided to restructure and expand the film, with the two guys searching for Laura as the opening story, we realized that this one story was almost like its own film. So that's when we decided that in order to organize everything coherently, we'd need to split it into two films, or two parts. And then, after deciding that Laura would eventually tell her own story as if speaking over the radio, we came to the idea to have the first half be the guys' part and the second half be the women's part, with Rafael leaving town as a natural bridge between the two.

The idea was always to make a kind of mutant film, something that would be constantly changing, but changing subtly. If you were to think back to the first appearance of Laura, and then think about where she ends up at the end of the film, we wanted that shift to be almost imperceptible. One way we thought to achieve this was through a performance style that wasn't overly dramatic, or broad, but instead so natural and *un*-mysterious that the viewer wouldn't be prepared for when the film shifts into another thing. The only person who doesn't perform in that way is Elisa Carricajo, as the doctor, who is supposed to be a bit more like a character out of a thriller. But otherwise we told the actors to push against the inclination to perform like they're involved in a mystery.

Scope: El Pampero's history is very much linked with Piel de Lava, with two of the troupe's actresses appearing in the film. How has this relationship developed over the years?

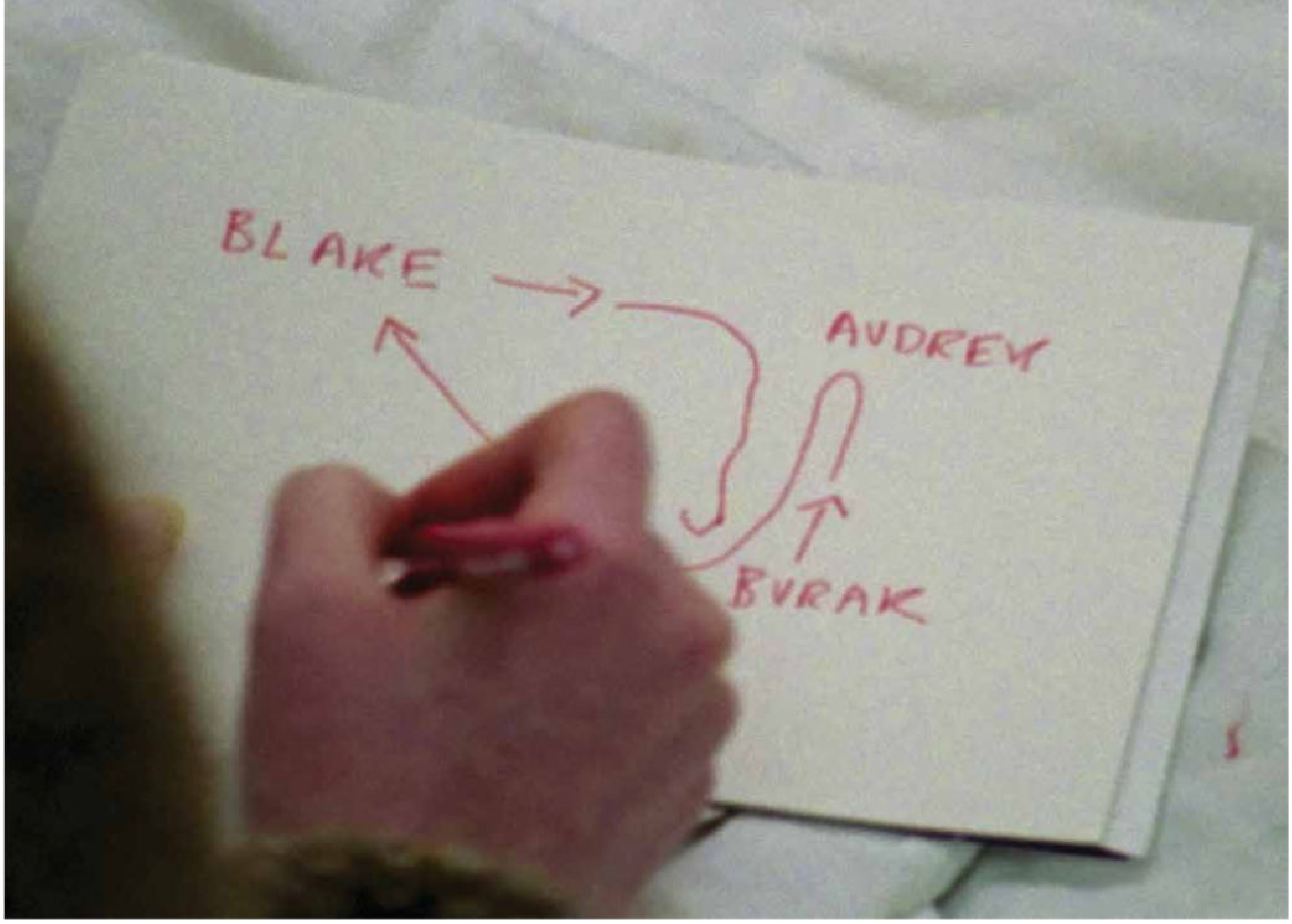
Citarella: We are kind of a family. I think Piel de Lava works in a similar way to El Pampero. There's something in *Trenque Lauquen* that's very similar to all of our lives, and that's the close relationship between friendship and work. I often think how I became so close to Mariano, and it's because we've had such intense experiences together making films. In *Trenque Lauquen*, Ezequiel and Laura fall in love while working together and reading through these love letters. In a similar way, we've all developed close friendships and even relationships through our work together, particularly through the making of *La flor*. When you get to this level of connection, it's easy to work together because you begin to really understand the people you're working with as friends and partners.

Scope: Music plays a big role in the film. Certain songs and motifs even act like quasi-themes, from the Argentine song that plays during many of Ezequiel's driving scenes to Laura's Elvis Presley ringtone. How did this melodic thread take shape?

Citarella: I was interested in the idea of each character having a favourite song. For Laura, using "Suspicious Minds" as her ringtone was a way to confirm that this is the same character from *Ostende*. For Ezequiel, we used a song called "Los Caminos," which I think really expresses what the character is going through. There's something Ezequiel can't say, or maybe he doesn't even know about himself, and I think the song says it for him, which is why he is listening to it all the time. It's like when you're young and you listen to a song over and over because you somehow relate to it. So the idea was to identify every character with a song—even Carmen Zuna has an orchestral theme.

Scope: Do you envision Laura encountering more mysteries in the future?

Citarella: Yes, I think so. My plan is to make a small film next, something I can shoot in like two weeks. But then it would be great, maybe in a few years, to see what Laura is up to. In ten years we'll be 50, so we'll have to see what we can do with regards to being older. Laura in *Ostende* is 27 or 28, so even doing *Trenque Lauquen* was strange as we approached 40 to try to do something similar when we were now older and having kids. Laura and I always joked how we were now two old ladies revisiting something we did in our twenties. So we'll have to see what time proposes and how we can renew the process. For example, what city and what kind of situation will Laura be in ten years from now? Will she have kids? We'll have to wait and see, but it is something we intend to do.



Alter Egos

On *A Woman Escapes*

BY JOSH CABRITA

The first thing one is liable to notice while watching *A Woman Escapes*, a feature-length collaboration between Sofia Bohdanowicz, Burak Çevik, and Blake Williams, is that the film comprises three image formats: 16mm, 3D, and 4K. The second is that each format roughly corresponds to the contribution of one of the co-directors. In her shorts and features, Bohdanowicz utilizes a handmade style that has come to be associated with 16mm formats; Toronto-based experimental filmmaker (and contributor to this very magazine) Williams is, next to Ken Jacobs, arguably the foremost proponent of 3D in an experimental film context; and Çevik, the Turkish director of *Belonging* (2019), here assumes responsibility for the 4K.

At the beginning of the film, we are introduced to three main characters, Blake, Burak and Audrey (the latter played by Deragh Campbell, Bohdanowicz's frequent performative surrogate), through a series of video correspondences that the co-director's onscreen alter egos exchange with each other. All of these figures appear (or are heard) in the space of images we would associate with the respective practices of Williams, Çevik, and Bohdanowicz. Consequently, there seems to be an intrinsic bond between the form of a given contributor and the appearance of a particular format or figure. In these early stages, it is easy enough to cut across all of these levels when attempting to attribute entire sequences to one co-director or another.

Had Bohdanowicz, Çevik, and Williams continued to use the traditional markers of their style to clearly delineate their separate contributions, there would be little distinguishing *A Woman Escapes* from an average omnibus, in which the linkages between sections are mostly arbitrary and the contributions of different directors function as standalone works. Thankfully, there's more to *A Woman Escapes* than that. As the film progresses, the transitions between the co-directors' contributions take on significance, and the question arises as to how all three styles can coexist within a shared space of interaction.

One potential answer is to have a single representational mode "frame" the others. Bohdanowicz's style, which is by far the most concrete of the three, seems like the obvious candidate to play the mediating role. If we treat Williams' and Çevik's contributions as contained inside Bohdanowicz's stylistic framework, *A Woman Escapes* could be said to tell the story of Audrey, a thirty-something Canadian who comes to stay in Paris for a month after the death of her friend Julianne (the main subject in Bohdanowicz's *Maison du bonheur* [2017]). While living in Julianne's old apartment, Audrey exchanges video messages with two filmmaker friends, Blake and Burak, but is unable to conjure much creativity herself. Instead of producing original work, Audrey lifts verbal citations from Robert Bresson's *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* (1956) and manipulates the videos that her friends have already sent to her. Eventually, Blake confronts her about this practice and accuses her of "stealing other people's words."

It might seem obvious that Blake rebukes Audrey for not citing her sources. But Blake does this very thing throughout *A Woman Escapes* (as when he recreates Anthony McCall's *Light Describing a Cone* [1973]), and so does Burak. So the problem is not just that Audrey takes other people's words and images and passes them off as her own. That sort of appropriation still demands to be understood within the dramatic context established by the "Audrey" frame, whereas Blake's remark addresses the organizational structure of *A Woman Escapes* as a whole. If Audrey (or the mode she stands in for) is a thief from Blake's perspective, then, it's because she continually reifies both his and Burak's images to a continuum that she alone imposes. Whatever power Williams' phantasmagoric montage and Çevik's disjunctive plays with image and sound usually have to disrupt our ordinary sense of space-time, these ruptures are made relative to the month-long timeline of the Audrey narrative—a timeline that is itself made unequivocal by the recurring use of title cards.

Festival reviewers who labelled *A Woman Escapes* an "Audrey movie"—that is, a continuation of the autobiographical series that Bohdanowicz has explored across four other works—have read the film almost entirely in this way, assuming that its narrative-driven sections provide the overarching relational structure that makes its other individual passages intelligible. But suppose we stop giving primacy to the "Audrey" frame and grant equal credence to the other two paradigms. The trouble then becomes to coherently unify stylistic modes that otherwise exclude each other. What could link these three representational systems together if adopting the parameters of one prevents the possibility of using devices endemic to another? Is there a way out of this bind without having recourse to the arbitrariness of the omnibus or the flattening-out of the framing device? Can there be an organizational pattern that allows all the modes to exist in the confines of a single work while still encouraging genuine experimentation between them?

A Woman Escapes navigates these problems in a genuinely ingenious way. Rather than trying to find a structure that could unite all the modes together under one banner, the co-directors allow their contributions to open directly onto each other. For this aesthetic strategy to work, the transitions between the film's discrete sections cannot belong to one mode or another (since that would create another frame) but must instead be irreducible to the images they divide and separate. A particularly striking use of these interstic-

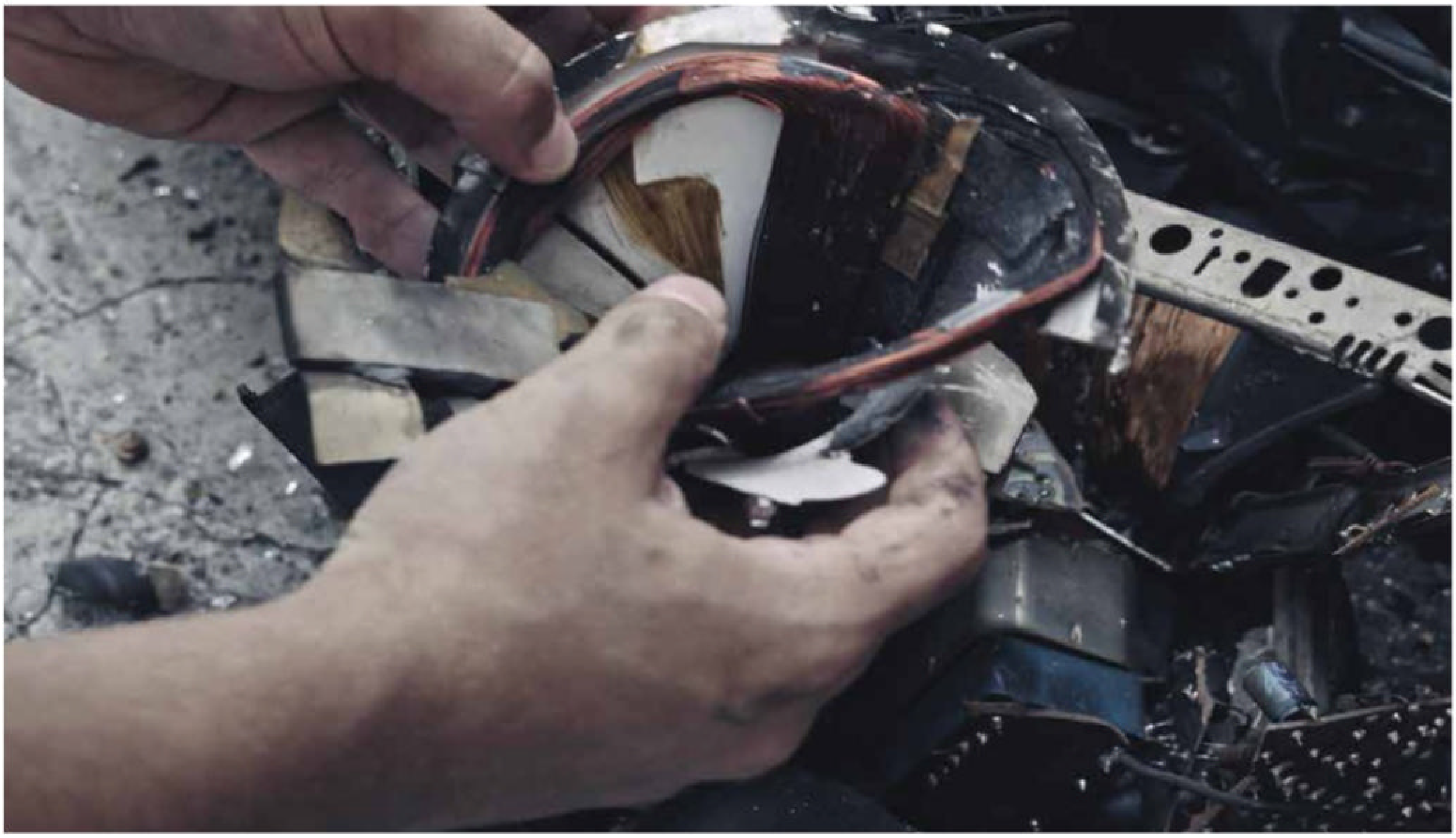
es appears throughout a sequence that alternates between a shot of Audrey waiting for her laundry and an image of a seaside vista in Turkey. Initially, these transitions are given explicit motivation through Audrey's laptop, which appears cropped at the bottom of the screen, but as the scene wears on, and the contrapuntal rhythm between the images becomes more intense, the interval detaches itself from either mode and begins to stand for itself.

What this means, in other words, is that no single stylistic dimension can be taken as "framing" the film as a whole. No one mode is responsible for the film's structuring cuts. In practical terms, this means that Bohdanowicz, Çevik, and Williams are all obliged to work with techniques and materials associated with another collaborator while still retaining the fundamental integrity of their respective practices. The primary pleasure offered by *A Woman Escapes* is seeing how these exchanges push each co-director (or, rather, the style we would associate with them) out of their comfort zone, compelling them to respond, adapt, and eventually evolve in ways that would have been difficult to imagine without the benefit of this experiment.

One of the film's more memorable instances of a stylistic mode adopting a trait of another comes courtesy of Çevik, whose *Belonging* relied upon a disjunction between highly charged narration and empty, subdued imagery. In that earlier film, Çevik wouldn't do anything to produce a visual jolt, since that would risk giving his metaphorical presentation a dramatic context. And yet here, in an entirely wordless sequence, he has a tube television come crashing down from an apartment overhead, its screen smashing into tiny shards. Why does he do this? Because the best way he knows to recreate the affective punch of Williams' televisual abstractions is to literally send one of those devices overboard.

A slightly less aggressive stylistic adaptation involves Bohdanowicz's integration of 3D and Williams' use of voiceover narration, a device that would have been pretty well unimaginable in his short films and solo feature *PROTOTYPE* (2017). The problem Williams faces in assimilating the sort of narration found in Bohdanowicz's work is almost the opposite confronted by Bohdanowicz in appropriating Williams' imagery. For Williams, words pose a challenge because they have a tendency to reify to the person speaking them; whereas for Bohdanowicz, Williams' images are problematic because they tend to operate below the level of consciousness and resist being attached to any subjectivity. In two particular instances, while working with each others' materials, Williams and Bohdanowicz (or what I'm associating with their modes) devise different techniques to retain the basic parameters of their own working methods—he by putting his narration into the "future unreal" tense, which describes imaginary events that haven't happened yet; and she by asserting "I never appear, but all I see is me there," which reframes Williams' image as one of Audrey's personal memories.

All of the reverberations that pass between the modes in *A Woman Escapes* are ultimately what hold the whole project together. They don't function like the transitions in an omnibus, because they bring the co-directors' contributions into a shared space of interaction, forcing each of them to adapt their style to that of another collaborator. Yet they also don't work like the "frame," because they unify the work without privileging a single kind of structure. If the three styles did not each have their own individual (and reciprocally incompatible) means of achieving similar effects, but were instead capable of representing the same things in precisely the same ways, then there would be no lines of experimentation between them. The fact that Bohdanowicz, Çevik, and Williams' formal frameworks do not synthesize into a higher one does not suggest a failure of their imaginations; it is, rather, the very condition of their creativity.



Matters of Fact

Antoine Bourges on *Concrete Valley*

BY LAWRENCE GARCIA

For its casting of non-professional actors within a mostly scripted narrative, Antoine Bourges' latest feature, *Concrete Valley*, has already been called a docu-fiction "hybrid." Set in the East Toronto neighbourhood of Thorncliffe Park, an initial landing spot for new Canadian immigrants, the film centres on Rashid (Hussam Douhna), a former physician from Syria who settles there with his wife, Farah (Amani Ibrahim), and their young son Ammar (Abdullah Nadaf). Apart from Ibrahim, who in the film plays a former actor, everyone who appears in *Concrete Valley* is an amateur performer. If it's often difficult to tell this, though, it's largely because of the film's distinct conversational rhythms, which are driven by the simple fact of its characters having to speak an unfamiliar language: English. (For its regulation of tone and its willingness to linger in the stilted, awkward silences of conversation, the closest point of comparison I could think of—and it's not terribly close—was Hal Ashby's 1979 *Being There*.) Indeed, if the integration of non-professionals comes off so seamlessly in *Concrete Valley*, it may be because the presence of language barriers permits Bourges and co-writer Teyama Alkamli to "naturalize" scripted dialogue, so to speak. In the context of the film, the technical imperfections of an amateur's line readings become indistinguishable from a natural portrayal of mental translation.

The term "hybrid," in any case, simply repackages what André Bazin in 1948 called the "law of the amalgam," which designated how a mix of actors and non-professionals could create on set a general atmosphere of authenticity and a minimum of theatrical pretense. This is, in some sense, just filmmaking advice, but its deeper implications fit into the much richer thesis Bazin forward-ed in his writings on Italian neorealism. Of Rossellini's *Paisan* (1946), he claimed that the unit of cinematic narrative was not the "shot" but the "fact": "a fragment of concrete reality in itself multiple and full of ambiguity, whose meaning emerges only after the fact, thanks to other imposed facts between which the mind establishes certain relationships." The developments of the classical Hollywood film had led viewers at the time to take cinematic narrative and character psychology for granted. The claim, then, was that with the neorealists, one could no longer assume the existence of narrative: one had also to account for its *emergence* from the "centrifugal properties of images...which make the narrative possible" to begin with. Bazin's animating conviction is that if we are to speak of cinematic narrative and psychology at all, we can do so only after contending with the image.

I take the time to restate Bazin's thesis because I believe Bourges' *Concrete Valley* has found a novel angle on it. By emphasizing the primacy of the "image fact," Bazin attacked not just the pervasive notion that narrative could be taken for granted, but also the assumption that its articulation *in words* was not a problem, that it did not have to answer to ambiguous fragments of reality. By virtue of its setting and subject, *Concrete Valley* redoubles this issue of articulation. As new immigrants, Rashid and Farah are faced with the arduous task of learning a new language, and, to that end, we see the former attending English classes in Thorncliffe Park. Arguably more difficult, though, is their having to contend with non-verbal cultural barriers, a foreign world of images and unspoken rules which they must likewise learn to navigate. Continually, the characters find themselves in situations whose full import they are unable to read. Confronted with invisible barriers of communication, with strangers whose motivations they cannot quite place, the characters are faced with two options: they can choose to either fall back onto judgment and prejudice, or risk something of themselves and engage with others in a spirit of trust.

Throughout *Concrete Valley*, Rashid's attempts to address the lack of hot water in their apartment clearly illustrate this choice. Introduced at the very start of the film and only resolved near the very end, this episodic subplot marks several points where things could go wrong—situations where Rashid, who is forced to engage the help of multiple strangers, can either retreat into prejudice or risk having his trust betrayed. The generous spirit of *Concrete Valley* is that all these potential failures resolve well, as if rewarding Rashid's sundry leaps of faith. Crucially, though, these resolutions are always delayed. Only later—sometimes much later—are we (and Rashid) able to make judgments of character or psychology; only later are we able to assemble what we've seen into something resembling narrative.

This dynamic, which gives priority to fact over story, extends to the whole of *Concrete Valley*, which at times gives the uncanny impression of having no narrative at all. For instance, while it may be possible to see the film as presenting a marital drama between Rashid and Farah, this ignores the extent to which their scenes together are broken up by a range of tangential, even perpendicular material. Even this account, which already sees the film's flow of everyday occurrences in relation to the couple's marriage, is highly partial. Although Bourges presents most every scene with the emphasis usually granted to plot points, it remains an open question, even at the end, whether any given one can be considered a narrative development.

For this reason, *Concrete Valley* moves forward almost by sleight of hand, and it is often difficult to pinpoint precisely where Bourges' authorial interventions lie. The notable exception comes at the very end, when we see Rashid back in his English class reading out a writing assignment—a story that condenses his entire experience over the past few days, one that pulls from, but is not beholden to, actual events we've seen across the film. In this moment, his authorial voice is completely identified with Bourges', and we experience the story as a closing gesture from both equally. The scene expresses a conviction that runs throughout Bourges' work—a belief that, insofar as story exists in the cinema, it can only ever come after the fact.

Cinema Scope: How did you become interested in the Thorncliffe Park neighbourhood?

Antoine Bourges: It started when I was finishing my previous film, *Fail to Appear* (2017). We were shooting at a location where I had to drive past the Don Valley Parkway and Thorncliffe Park. From my car window, I would see these clusters of 15 or 16 high-rise buildings towering over a luscious green forest. I started visiting the neighbourhood and found out that it used to be a racetrack before the '50s, at which point it was turned into a sort of utopian, modernist experiment, with high-rises built to house big families. The idea was to have workers live far away from the factories, but it ended up creating places that are more isolated and often not well maintained. There's something interesting about the layout of the neighbourhood, where the high-rises surround this area where children play, with a very large school and a kind of settlement centre which is mainly a place for people to learn English. And because it's "Arrival City," a first landing spot, almost everyone is a new immigrant. Language is the centre of the neighbourhood. The idea of learning a new language became one of the starting points for the film.

Scope: This was your first time working with a co-writer, Teyama Alkamli. How did that change how you shaped the film?

Bourges: Teyama, who's a Syrian filmmaker, first offered to work with me as someone who could impart some of her cultural background. Once we decided that there would be Syrian performers, it was important to have someone from that community. She would come and help decide how plausible or realistic a given scene or interaction was. Eventually she became a real co-writer and we'd throw around ideas about a scene, or why someone would behave in a certain way, or how we could enrich a certain character. It became a real exchange of ideas.

Scope: Your previous films involved a lot of improvisation. How much of this film was scripted?

Bourges: It's way more scripted than my previous work, even though it had the same sort of proportion of non-professional actors. It was a bit of a gamble to have something more scripted, but one of the exciting things about the film was the decision to

mix as many kinds of accents and types of performances as we could, because that's what the neighbourhood felt like to me when I would spend time there. I wasn't too sure how it would come together and whether it would be homogeneous, or just eclectic and strange. But it was important to have a range of different approaches to performance.

Scope: The film has very singular conversational rhythms, especially the way that the pauses between lines play out. Where did those come into the process? Did you have those rhythms worked out on the page, or did they mainly come during workshopping and on-set rehearsals?

Bourges: Since the film is about people who have had experiences quite different from mine, it wasn't possible to imagine things for myself. Having Teyama with me during casting and rehearsal was very useful. Since we were doing this during COVID, we would rehearse in the park and the cast would improvise around a few lines we'd give them. Later we would write down lines and they would have to perform them on set. But improvising is one thing, and getting lines right is another, especially if you're not an actor. There was a fair amount of time spent on set crafting the whole rhythm of the scene.

Many of the interactions have this beautiful, interesting awkwardness of people who aren't speaking their own language. They're using this proxy language to talk about things that are quite matter of fact. It's always interesting to see how when Farah is back home, speaking in her own language, there's an entirely different quality to her. There's a kind of comfort and vulnerability which you can't sense otherwise; it feels like someone is speaking more from their soul. Something is revealed, and you can see that when it's placed in contrast with the characters having to use this other language outside of their homes.

Scope: There's the great scene when Rashid walks out of his English class and is almost shocked to see Farah talking with someone else. As he later says, it's like seeing an entirely different person.

Bourges: When you spend a lot of time with someone, you feel like you possess this idea of who they are. It's almost a proprietary thing. And at least for Rashid, it feels like a betrayal when his wife becomes someone else, even though it has nothing to do with him. When she's a certain way when she talks to that woman, and a completely different way when she talks to him or other Arabic people, it doesn't mean that she's being inauthentic. She's just being herself in a different variation. But to him it's a bit of an affront.

Scope: Could you talk about the intimate scene of the couple in bed near the end of the film? It's the one scene where I thought that maybe both husband and wife were professional actors, because it plays out for much longer than I would've expected. How did you go about choreographing or planning that scene?

Bourges: Without getting into the behind-the-scenes details too much, it ended up being like the way we would help a non-professional hit their lines. We set up four or five objectives, one after the other, so we could go from the very beginning to the end of the scene by just switching between specific moments. It took a while to have the performers remember the order of these things, and then to achieve them in a way that was seamless. But we didn't necessarily know that the scene would run for as long as it did.

Scope: It's particularly impressive on Hussam Douhna's part. I don't imagine that most non-professionals would be able to pull off a scene like that.

Bourges: He's not a performative person at all. But he's also someone who's a bit radical and quite daring. I think that scene was exciting for him to just try. But it's true that most non-professional actors could not pull that off.

Scope: *Fail to Appear* has a pretty assertive structure, with the hand-off from Deragh Campbell's character to Nathan Roder's character. Here, there are some clear through-lines with the water-heater subplot and the relationship between the husband and wife, but the structure isn't quite as up-front. Could you talk about how you organized the film?

Bourges: I started with the idea of making a film about the beginning of the end of a relationship. I knew that I wanted to explore this neighbourhood and the experience of being a new immigrant. I was also interested in language and communication—or rather the difference between language and communication—and someone struggling with one or both. The writing was just about maintaining these three through-lines in the back of my mind, seeing how I could hit each of them, or even hit all three at the same time. The challenge, but also the excitement of writing, was keeping things simple while still playing with the possible combinations.

Scope: Could you talk about the bookends of the film? It begins with Rashid wandering through the woods, and ends with the story he tells in his English class. Those felt like clear authorial gestures.

Bourges: The end was something that came through filming. I often don't know how I'm going to end a film before I shoot. Here I had some vague ideas, but after we started shooting, it made sense to end in the English class, because it's a place where Rashid expresses himself in a way that's not necessarily honest, but at least quite clear. Even though what he's expressing in that scene is not necessarily something that happened, I wanted to allow him the pleasure of describing a token moment that he conjures from the things he's seen over the past few days. We as an audience would not necessarily put things in that order, but the scene was about giving him the final word, letting him reorganize and have control over the narrative of his life.

The beginning of the film, where Rashid is lost in the woods at night, was not supposed to be the beginning. That was the only footage that was not in the script. We wanted the film to start with this person being lost in the woods, and it's referred to throughout, but we didn't necessarily want to show it. But we shot it just in case, and it eventually became clear that the film needed to start this way.

Scope: It's the kind of scene that might play as too metaphorical if it came later in the film. Having it at the beginning gives it this metaphorical charge, while still being this concrete event that's referred to multiple times.

Bourges: Precisely because it's at the beginning of the film, a lot of people read it as this abstract prologue, whereas it's just the beginning of what happens. But I like that it can be read both ways. It does take place in this in-between land, right in the forest where the setting has something a bit magical about it.

Scope: You tend to present space in a very particular way, showing only one dimension of it, then cutting to reveal a whole other dimension. Early in *Concrete Valley*, we see Farah getting ready for work and drying off her son's hair, operating as if she's alone. Only later, when she finally addresses Rashid, do we realize he's been in the room this whole time. Do you have rules you set up for yourself when you work with a particular space? How do you conceptualize the locations you shoot in?

Bourges: It's often easier for me to write once I know the layout of the space. Sometimes it's a matter of revealing things in a way that gets into the subjective world of these characters, rather than taking a detached, objective view of the setting. It was important to visually convey the characters' feelings of uncertainty about this stage in their lives. There are lots of filmmakers that have this clarity in showing space. The mystery in their films comes from another place, and I do love that. But for this film, it was important to be very selective in revealing certain spaces.

Scope: Like *Fail to Appear*, *Concrete Valley* was shot by Nikolay Michaylov. Was there a conscious change in your visual approach to this film as compared to that earlier one?

Bourges: The films are always guided by their settings. The main visual element here was the dichotomy between the buildings and the forests and the greenery. But we also knew that we wanted to be closer to the characters than in my previous films, both in terms of physical distance and the type of lenses that we used. There was something about these characters that was mysterious, but that we couldn't quite get close to. And even if we got really close to them, there would still be some mystery that would remain.

Scope: Watching the film, I almost felt this sort of invisible line forming in each space. And the tension often derived from the question of whether the characters would reach out across this line.

Bourges: Sometimes the choice has a purely narrative motivation. In the scene you mentioned, because this is a couple who doesn't communicate, it's interesting to see someone who looks like they're completely alone. It becomes a matter of maintaining people in separate frames.

Scope: Leaving aside the relationship between the husband and wife, the most noticeable thing about the script is that all the expected conflicts fail to materialize. There are multiple points at which things could go wrong, and only later do we realize that

they don't. The film has a pretty generous spirit in that way, as if rewarding the characters' trust. Did you consciously want that sort of optimism?

Bourges: Maybe it's just how I see things. I'm always interested in situations where there's no clear antagonist. People are generally trying to help each other, but there might still be an issue. The challenge is finding a conflict in a situation where everyone is trying to make it work, in places that may not be the most obvious ones.

Scope: These days, any film that has non-professionals tends to be called a "hybrid" film. I don't find the label very useful, but I'm curious what you make of it as a filmmaker and as a film professor.

Bourges: It's complicated, because I never actually think about fiction or documentary when I start making a film. My choices are always guided by necessity and just asking, "Who can I cast?" And I always look for actors—when I can't find them, then I start looking for non-actors. *East Hastings Pharmacy* (2012) was shot on a set that was a replica of a pharmacy, but we did look for a real pharmacy to shoot in, so I don't have a kind of dogmatic preference. To me, filmmaking is about representation. You find the tools to represent something. By saying that, I realize I'm probably more of a fiction filmmaker, because the representation itself is more important than the seal of the real. I personally think this is a fiction film, but the label is extremely slippery.

Scope: When thinking about this fiction or documentary question, I sometimes go back to how people have theorized the difference between theatre and film. Tarkovsky, for instance, emphasized the uniqueness of a filmic event, in contrast to the theatre, which necessitates a stronger recognition of character types and genres. And this has to do with the different order of representation that is possible in the cinema versus theatre. Because of how you can present people in the cinema, showing their facial twitches in close-up, their physical specificity, you're not as attached to types. Which is why he, like a lot of other filmmakers, emphasizes this element of "truth," how you can almost capture a fragment of reality. Pialat, in his way, does this in his films.

Bourges: Pialat is actually a huge influence. What I love is how he'll have characters act one way in a certain scene and then completely differently in another. And it never feels like it's bad acting or that there's something that doesn't work—it always just seems like the same person. That's something that I was quite conscious of doing with the performers in this film. I wanted to have people reveal different sides of themselves to create a multifaceted portrait. Not by having them evolve in a character arc, but just by having them in different situations, talking to different people who have a different accent and who might reveal a different way of behaving.

Scope: Pialat is often quite aggressive in playing up these discontinuities, which makes us realize the extent to which we assemble the character, the person presented to us onscreen. We see drastically different sides of them, but just by recognizing them across different situations we can put them together, so to speak.

Bourges: And it reminds us of how we are all actors in this respect, just people performing in different ways all the time.

The Adventures of Gigi the Law

Alessandro Comodin, Italy/France/Belgium

BY JAY KUEHNER

Not since Corneliu Porumboiu's *Police, Adjective* (2009) has a cop movie been so sublimely uneventful as Alessandro Comodin's *The Adventures of Gigi the Law*, a slack portrait of an affable officer in Friuli's *polizia locale*. Pier Luigi Mecchia (a.k.a Gigi)—the director's real-life uncle, effectively playing himself—performs his perfunctory patrol in the town of San Michele al Tagliamento, but Comodin's film is more modern pastoral than police procedural. It's typically incantatory, owing primarily to the protagonist's Friulano accent, first heard in a nocturnal prologue wherein an off-duty Gigi defends his overgrown garden from the remonstrations of an unseen neighbour. Prolix to a fault, even comically absurd, the quarrelsome exchange is framed such as to create a man-nature dyad that looks, to all appearances, like someone arguing with the deep green fronds of a tree under an autumn moon.

The Adventures of Gigi the Law bids at levity in a tonal departure for Comodin, whose previous features *Summer of Giacomo* (2011) and *Happy Times Will Come Soon* (2016), while similarly languorous, offered a more sober gaze upon protagonists likewise embedded in nature, their fates ringed in near-mythological proportion. As earthy, realist fables that shifted organically between the conceptual registers of documentary and fiction, these films evinced a certain debt to the fashionable indeterminacy of auteurist cinema while ripening purely on the director's own terms. With *Gigi,* Comodin has teased out a certain off-kilter comedy from the lassitude, yet a familiar undercurrent of lived anxiety remains. Like its eccentric lead, the film's easygoing nature is afforded at some expense, a latent distress that commingles imperceptibly with the bucolic breeze.

From the shadowy intro, a cut to daylight, with Gigi at the wheel of his patrol car—the fixed position from which he'll spend much of the film, both observing and being observed—offers a stark but unrevealing contrast that is nevertheless suggestive: that the landscape before him, essentially the world at large circumscribed by rural roadways, is a kind of unkempt garden, and the dishevelled and playfully mischievous Gigi is at home in it. As one seemingly sympathetic to, yet saddened by, the delinquencies of nature, what might he be on the lookout for, exactly? Not quite a stalker, nor a voyeur, Gigi proceeds with casual circumspection as a witness to the town's goings-on, which are visibly lean—it's mostly a scene without a crime. But the discovery of a young woman's remains on the railway tracks prompts a speculative unease over the film's, and by implication Gigi's, otherwise blithe regard.

Comodin teases certain genre elements in *Gigi,* namely in the vague suspicion that Gigi and his ride-along partners, more buttoned-up than he, bear toward various townsfolk whom they deem "fishy." But nothing much materializes, leaving Gigi to consider the lesser transgressions piquing his vigilance and the viewer to contemplate less hyperbolic yet no less mysterious uses of plot. Something is indeed amiss—or rather, missing—here, and Comodin hinges his film on that sense of vacancy as he proceeds, with the lightest of touches, to reorient our attention. There is a reported fire, but no smoke at the source. We see lone figures, simply out walking or on bike rides, to whom Gigi habitually bids a cordial "Buongiorno" (among them a student who's failed his exams and has been scolded at home, and who invites Gigi to take his scooter for a humorously literal spin). A villager with 12 cats (note, all the females spayed) hangs his laundry out to dry. A neighbour, again, scolds Gigi for his wayward acacia tree. All of this anodyne sensibility is taken in a kind of listless, bemused stride. "Smell that chamomile!" exhorts Gigi to a colleague, car windows down as the fields scroll past, in what may be the film's most sincere, modest, and yet insistent demand.

Amidst the general inertia, Gigi's itinerant attention is piqued by the lilting voice of a new dispatcher, Paola (Ester Vergolini), beaming from his radio. "Paola to Gigi" becomes a recurring sonic set piece that Comodin channels to enchanting effect. Much of the film's soft power is derived from offscreen implications and the sly deployment of negative space, which often serves to focus our attention on Gigi's person—especially his mundanely handsome face with perpetually wandering eyes—in the habitual absence of reverse shots. This formal gambit acts as a reminder of the film's grounding in documentary observation. As such, *Gigi* affords through documentary what *Police, Adjective* did through fiction, dispelling our expectations of crime stories and directing us instead to a character study. Here, Gigi, inhabiting his former role as a civic policeman, is both a kind of folk hero and a victim of an overly playful imagination. Implicit in Comodin's sly mise en scène is the structural possibility that much of what transpires is unfolding inside Gigi's head.

Gigi's investigation shades into something more ambiguous, mournful, and occasionally surreal as the film goes on. He wanders the fatal railway tracks in a futile gesture toward understanding the spate of suicides there, an historically haunted place acting as a memorial to past and present generations (war veterans are tellingly invoked in passing). His inquisitive instinct seems, in the end, to be more existential in nature, perhaps a surrogate or substitute for self-reflection. Comodin stages a vespertine sequence of Gigi wandering his garden, provoked by the sight of his lone "suspect" Tomaso, whom he's vaguely pursued since the early association with the track incident, among the overgrowth. It is unclear just whom, or what, Gigi is pursuing here, but this part-reverie, part-hallucination feels like *Columbo* by way of Apichatpong or Guiraudie. It also echoes the *Jagdfieber* of Comodin's early eponymous short, the spell of hunting fever under which one effectively becomes the animal they are pursuing.

Thereafter, Gigi appears to be in the passenger seat on his daily rounds—a possible sign that he, and perhaps the narrative fantasy he's been ensconced in, has ceded to the real. Comodin engineers a speculative relationship to Gigi, who's at once a familiar uncle and an unknowable subject, whose "adventures" may be tantamount to projections, not least the dalliance occurring over the dispatch radio. Meanwhile, the routine of innocuous residential inspections and minor parking infractions is interrupted by the escort of a reluctant patient to a mental hospital, which finds Gigi revisiting a painful episode from his past. A candid park-bench exchange with Paola in which Gigi is, for once, turned away from the camera, reveals a man no longer flirting, but deeply vulnerable. It's clear that Gigi, while not broken, has cracked at times. With his starched epaulets and slight paunch overhanging an official white leather belt, he cuts an amicable, clownish figure whose repartee, in hindsight, seems like a gentle salve to his sorrow.

Comodin has veiled a rather tender documentary portrait beneath the cloak of a policier, crafting a nostalgic ode to his own youth, with a chorus of insects panting in the palpable late summer heat. His film also allows another, albeit redemptive, tour of duty for his beloved uncle, who now enjoys leading-man status with his own rather liberal code of law enforcement in the absence of a "pheasant" of a boss. Bumming cigarettes from a couple of workers in the field, enjoying a singalong to an Italian hit by Julio Iglesias (yes, Gigi is both pirate and gentleman), straying mischievously into other precincts, Gigi is a man lost between generations and preserved in a bucolic amber. It's a liminal zone to which Comodin repeatedly returns in his curiously carved-out cinema niche, where the laws of nature can't be enforced, only abided, and those of desire duly surrendered to.

The Eternal Daughter

Joanna Hogg, US/UK

BY MADELEINE WALL

Despite the noises at night, the things we might see out of the corner of our eye, and the dark, winding hallways, there's something comforting about a haunted house: we all have a desire for the past to not be completely gone, and maybe to think that the dead can still make their mark on the living. It's in just such a haunted house—in this case a large, fog-enshrouded Welsh manor—that Julie Hart (Tilda Swinton) has come to stay with her elderly mother Rosalind (Tilda Swinton, Part II) in Joanna Hogg's *The Eternal Daughter*. The reason for the Harts' visit is twofold: they've arrived both to celebrate Rosalind's upcoming birthday, and also as part of a larger project that Julie is working on. A filmmaker, she hopes to make a movie about her mother, and so has them return to this primordial scene—the family home where Rosalind once stayed as a child.

Rather than signalling an art filmmaker's brief foray into Hammer horror territory (or, as per its distributor, "elevated" horror), *The Eternal Daughter* feels like a denouement to *The Souvenir* (2019) and *The Souvenir Part II* (2021), featuring the same Hogg substitute as that played in the previous films by Swinton's daughter, Honor Swinton-Byrne, but now at a later stage in life. Furthermore, while the *Souvenirs*—which saw Swinton-Byrne's Julie, a young, budding film student, coming to terms with her first love, first loss, and the gap between the image she created of her first love and who he really was—were primarily explorations of the world-building power of film, *The Eternal Daughter* is concerned with how film can function as a world-ending practice, as the middle-aged Julie, now a far more confident image-maker, turns her gaze to her recently widowed mother (also played by Swinton in the *Souvenirs*). Here, Hogg's focus is primarily on the relationship between the women, which proves complex—as Julie struggles to connect to her mother, the gap between them is revealed to be temperamental as well as generational.

This is not the first time Hogg has explored this particular dynamic. In *Archipelago* (2010), siblings Edward (Tom Hiddleston) and Cynthia (Lydia Leonard) go on vacation to a cottage in Italy with their mother, Patricia (Kate Fahy), where all parties clash over their respective life trajectories and class anxieties. (We all regress when we're with our parents.) Hogg excels at these sorts of chamber dramas, giving her actors the space to inhabit the tragedies of their little lives; she dramatizes the explosiveness of years of issues bubbling up

only to have them quickly pushed aside or shoved out of sight, a repression grounded in a steely desire to maintain the status quo.

While Julie in *The Souvenir* ends up making a film we can actually see (though this is doubled by the end with an all-the-world's-a-stage reveal), the image-making of the older Julie in *The Eternal Daughter* bleeds through the material by having the mother and daughter played by the same actress. Is it that Julie, the titular Eternal Daughter, sees them as being the same and is trying to find common ground through their similarities, or is it rather the inescapable, involuntary similarity between parent and child? In this context, small items become talismans with whole histories attached to them, both of a family dynamic and a larger history; for example, the awkward placing of a bag of photos by one's feet at a dinner table, when one is too shy to share them outright but wants them always on hand if the opportunity arises. Primarily acting against herself, Swinton is able to flesh out two women who are ostensibly the same, but also fundamentally worlds apart. Swinton-as-Rosalind feels delicate and frail, reminding us that the most frightening moments are when we're confronted with the fragile and aging maternal body. Julie struggles, torn between a childish desire to please her mother (if you can please a wealthy British retiree) and a desire for them to relate as adults. Hogg regularly frames the two women with mirrors, gesturing towards attempts to contain them that succeed only as fragments, the whole human being beyond authentic depiction.

With cinematographer Ed Rutherford's use of 35mm Panavision, the dark, winding hallways and bangings in the night certainly invoke genre; Hogg, in turn, plays with these expectations. Julie spends the evening wandering the topiary gardens, but for reasons less gothic than one would expect: she's simply searching for a decent phone signal or taking the dog out to pee. Similarly, what we initially think is the film's score ends up being diegetic noise; the intruder Julie fears is really just a cousin who comes to visit unannounced; and, rather than making any supernatural discoveries, Julie learns instead about the all-too-natural effects of mourning. As Julie takes a photo of her mother, Rosalind scoffs, "Don't you have enough pictures of me?" For Julie's film project is another duplicate, this time the dynamic between adult children and their parents, echoing through the relationship of subject and artist.

The mother-daughter dynamic is but one of the haunted personal histories in the film. The manor that Julie and Rosalind are staying in—now a hotel overseen by a rude and domineering concierge (Carly-Sophia Davies)—once belonged to Rosalind's aunt, and was where she and her young siblings fled during the Second World War. It is only by being here, returning to a primordial home, that Rosalind opens up, and Julie learns of the family tragedies that are tied to this place. As she wanders the halls at night, it becomes clear that Julie is the ghost here: watching the concierge warily from above, holding on to a past that is as old as the stone angels that line the rooftops.

There is a necessary smallness to *The Eternal Daughter*, beyond the limitations of making a film during the pandemic, but that smallness is also its weakness. The house, full of history, is empty, and the two Swintons are not quite enough to fill it. The minute but profound gap between mother and daughter mirrors the divide between what the film reveals and what its potential audience's expectations of a ghost story might be. But the care for an elderly parent, the day-to-day work so well-presented here, is its own kind of supernatural—what Rosalind wisely calls the "practical magic of love." Hogg's use of setting and genre offers one exploration of externalized grief, only to return us, finally, to the body, their body. Who needs a haunted house when you see the ghost every time you look in the mirror?

I Have Electric Dreams

Valentina Maurel, Costa Rica/Belgium/France

BY JASON ANDERSON

Oscillating abruptly and often painfully between conflicting states of adolescence and adulthood, Eva (Daniela Marin Navarro), the teenaged protagonist of Valentina Maurel's *I Have Electric Dreams*, seems acutely uncomfortable within her own skin. While, on the one hand, this makes her arguably like just about any other 16-year-old—i.e., a boiling cauldron full of warring hormones, unmanageable emotions, and irrational impulses—at times she seems to represent such an extreme case that it can feel like Maurel is just a few steps away from adopting the more visceral tactics of body horror. However, the director also makes it abundantly clear, from the mixture of curiosity, loathing, desire, and disgust with which Eva regards her own physicality, that even ostensibly ordinary bodies don't need any extra goop to seem alien or monstrous. Her new scents are a subject of special fascination for Eva, judging by her habit of reaching into her underwear and then sniffing her fingers, as well as the moment in which she checks out her armpits after the stunningly wrongheaded decision that precipitates her entry into proverbial womanhood.

What with the ferocity, combustibility, and vulnerability she conveys as the film's compelling, if sometimes maddening, heroine, it's no surprise that Navarro scored one of the film's three prizes at Locarno. (The others went to Reinaldo Amien Gutiérrez, who plays her equally messy father, and Maurel, who achieved the rare feat of winning Best Director for a first feature.) But it's a testament to the nuance, texture, and specificity that Maurel brings to *I Have Electric Dreams* that her protagonist doesn't overwhelm the film as a whole. Born and raised in San Jose, Costa Rica, Maurel studied in France before getting her degree in filmmaking at INSAS in Brussels. Her graduation short, *Paul est là* (2017)—a wry tragicomedy about a melancholy young woman who must contend with the sudden and inexplicable presence of her ex in her apartment—won the top prize in Cannes' Cinefondation section, and she again earned a place at the festival when her next short, *Lucia en el limbo* (2019), premiered in Critics Week. Eschewing the more Kaurismakian mode of *Paul*, *Lucia* anticipates Maurel's first feature in both its vivid use of the bustling streets of the director's Costa Rican hometown, and its sharp-eyed take on a 16-year-old girl who's bent on proving—to borrow the immortal words of Sarah Michelle Gellar's pseudo-Britney starlet in *Southland Tales* (2007)—that teen horniness is not a crime.

Like her predecessor Lucia, Eva is a creature of urges she couldn't suppress even if she tried. She is so consumed by her desires that she seems largely indifferent whenever anyone else in the household walks in on her as she's masturbating or—in one especially desperate moment—humping a desk corner. But the factor that separates Maurel's film from a more familiar, mishap-filled story of youthful experimentation and transformation is the stormy family dynamics and wider social conditions that surround Eva. If she is the raging fire inside *I Have Electric Dreams*, they are the gasoline that gets poured on top, accelerating more typical displays of adolescent volatility and irrationality into acts and situations that are more genuinely transgressive and, potentially, violent—a possibility that is flagged in the film's first sequence, which is also the last time we witness Eva's parents together. As Eva and her little sister, Sol (Adriana Costa Garcia), sit silently in the backseat, their parents Martin (Gutierrez) and Anca (Vivian Rodriguez) fight for control of the car radio before arriving at home, where Martin continues his tantrum by pounding on the hood and slamming his head against the garage door, giving an early indication that he may be coming apart even faster than his daughter is.

The timeline then jumps forward to present Eva and Sol living with Anca solo, but there's no question as to which side Eva has chosen in this domestic conflict. Treating her mother with scorn, and receiving it in return—"I don't recognize her anymore," Anca laments, perhaps knowing Eva is not out of earshot when she additionally calls her "unbearable"—Eva wants to live with her father, who's temporarily crashing at the apartment of his old friend Dove (Jose Pablo Segreda Johanning). Eva and Martin spend much of their time together travelling around San Jose to check out potential new homes, though Martin is evasive on the matter of whether it will include a second bedroom for her.

There's a brief respite from the rising tensions when Eva spends a night at the carnival with a friend. While drunken make-out sessions with nameless guys are part of the evening festivities, Eva is more affected by the charge she feels at the sight of women's bodies. The first belongs to a nameless fellow passenger on a spinning ride who's mostly unconcerned when her top falls down; the next is in a cheesy haunted house, where a woman in a bikini is magically transformed into an enraged gorilla. After taking her badly inebriated friend back to her father's place, Eva tends to her in the bathroom and regards Martin warily as he affects indifference to the girl's half-naked state. Indeed, what she's beginning to see is a new kind of gaze from her father, newly freed from his marital constraints. All this contributes to a troubling sexual undercurrent between the two, who, unsurprisingly, are mistaken for a couple during one apartment viewing.

Essentially, Eva has the rotten luck to be doing all she can to grow up fast just as her parents are clambering in the other direction. She bristles at the sight of Anca, a former dancer, flirting with the handsome contractor working on the house, and castigates her mother when she appears in her bedroom still wearing last night's makeup (even though Eva was out all night too). Sharing the longing to recapture his younger, bohemian self, Martin not only parties hard with Dove—who becomes another object of fascination for Eva, with inevitably problematic results—but also rekindles his youthful interest in writing poetry by attending earnest workshops; the film's title derives from the first line of one of his (surprisingly good) verses.

Martin's rediscovered artistic side is intertwined with his downward mobility in economic terms. He bitterly complains to Eva about the undeserved family inheritance that has given Anca the opportunity to renovate their old house while he struggles to find a place he can afford, and he's especially aggrieved after seeing an apartment in a modern building that is very different from the well-worn living spaces more typical of San Jose. That resentment bleeds over into his already tenuous relationship with Eva, and their elevator journey on the way down devolves into an ugly scene of anger and aggression. "You looking for a war?" Martin growls at Eva. "Are you?" is her equally hostile retort. Neither character, however, can know at this point how vicious their war is about to get.

It's thus that Maurel's remarkably astute coming-of-age story gains additional potency as a look at her country's disintegrating middle class. The film's harder-edged and avowedly urban sensibility also sets it apart from Nathalie Álvarez Mesén's *Clara Sola* (2021) and Ariel Escalante Meza's *Domingo and the Mist*, two other recent breakouts by young Costa Rican directors with rural settings and far more reserved natures. But as deeply rooted as *I Have Electric Dreams* may be in the specifics of San Jose, its unflinching clarity connects it to an ever-growing and very welcome canon of features about the complex dynamics between daughters and (very) difficult fathers: Maren Ade's mighty *Toni Erdmann* (2016) has helped create a space that has subsequently been filled by the similarly incisive likes of Ena Sendijarevic's *Take Me Somewhere Nice* (2019) and Charlotte Wells' *Aftersun*. So maybe it's only fair to give the last word to Anca, when she rages against Eva and warns her, "This obsession with your dad and all the men set to come after will pass!" Here's hoping the girl will be so lucky.

The Maiden

Graham Foy, Canada

BY SAFFRON MAEVE

The freight train barrelling along a moonlit overpass shows no signs of stopping, as Colton (Marcel T. Jiménez) cries out to Kyle (Jackson Sluiter), the latter just out of earshot and tramping along the tracks ahead. We're left with only a protracted noise: the clang and whoosh of bogies hitting rails, without a single yelp or thud to confirm our fear that Kyle—a kind-eyed River Phoenix manqué who picks flowers for cat burials and skateboards down craggy terrain in a leisurely frame of mind—has been killed; our only sign is the reflection of a crescent moon wobbles in the water after the accident, as if the sky is twisting in acknowledgement of some terrible loss. Following this tragic event, Graham Foy's debut feature *The Maiden* unfolds as a double-barrelled character study driven by a misplaced notebook, which conjoins the grieving Colton and the antsy, unpopular Whitney (Hayley Ness), a teenage girl who has disappeared. The film takes place in present-day Alberta, where Foy, a Calgary native, deftly peels apart memory and mourning to create a tactile and hauntological two-parter.

Colton and Kyle were childhood friends, as we learn through a photograph of the pair as schoolboys (apparently an undoctored picture, as actors Jiménez and Sluiter grew up together, a real-life rapport that Foy laces into the film's fabric). Theirs is a tender companionship, with dog days spent skateboarding and projecting fantasies beside a shoebox tape recording of Roger Miller's "Dear Heart," a melody that contorts into phantasm when played back in a tacit afterlife. The duo is only briefly shown to us, assembling a bouquet and raft for a cat's burial at sea, smashing old TV sets, tagging underpasses, and plucking crayfish from the water—a breezy, boyish, and soft-hearted bond cut brutally short, with Colton now left to wrangle the memories. As American poet Richard Siken once wrote, "Sometimes you get so close to someone you end up on the other side of them."

The same can be said, though less affectionately, for Whitney and her best friend June (Siena Yee), whose friendship is abraded by a snowballing disparity of interests: June falls in with the popular kids when she starts dating a football player—which means trucks, booze and parties—while Whitney, anxious, innocent, and perennially sporting a sequinned knapsack, cannot keep pace, though not for a lack of trying. Before she goes missing, Whitney leaves her diary—chock full of musings about nature and death—tucked under a rock, the hidden tome both gesturing at the film's thaumaturgical bent and also, perhaps, indicating Foy's need for some kind of narrative contrivance to thread together his lyrical imagery.

There's a cozy nomadism to DP Kelly Jeffrey's soulful 16mm rendering of Colton and Kyle skirting around ravines and subtopia, or of Whitney doubling over on a grassy roadside, post-panic attack. Jeffrey and Foy, who had already collaborated on a number of short films (including *Paradise Falls* [2013], *Practice!* [2014], and *Lewis* [2015]), here render the natural world as a salve for adolescent affliction and a bedroom for ghostly imaginings; the supernatural seems to linger just out of frame, plaiting together Kyle and Whitney's paths in what is presumably a post-mortem waiting room, where the social boundary between them melts entirely.

Beyond the obvious echoes of *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), there are shades of later Van Sant, such as *Elephant* (2003) and *Paranoid Park* (2007), in Foy's sense of stern fate, as well as of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's conduction of motion in the way that characters shrink into the frame, or how time can suddenly curl into itself. Foy has also cited Frederick Wiseman's *High School* (1968) as a point of reference (making him the fall's second Fred-head to go on the record, after James Gray), which evinces itself in a running bit where a highly enthusiastic English teacher raps Shakespeare—a partial rhyme with a scene in *High School* in which a teacher lectures on the poetics of Simon and Garfunkel's "The Dangling Conversation," and sharing with Wiseman's film a distinct lack of easy, condescending judgment.

Such well-placed details thrive in coming-of-agers, which typically annex adult hindsight to the transient, frenetic phase of adolescence. There's the occasional smartphone, Facebook wall, or electronica needle drop to tether *The Maiden* to the present day, but the film never over-exhausts its indulgence in its age bracket, instead granting its teens a leisurely, contemplative agency. Without resorting to cheap aesthetic signifiers, Foy stays keyed into how it *feels* to be young in the 21st century: that doomy sense that time is both hurtling away from you and never-ending, a sprawling, pliable temporality that stretches over these teenagers' lives like cellophane.

Crucially, we don't see anyone die in *The Maiden*, a ghost story wherein the dead are less gone than misplaced (even a lifeless cat appears to survive the cosmic wash cycle). While one may occasionally take issue with the film's determinedly elliptical approach to its central subject, Foy always remains both formally and narratively fastened to the amorphous, ugly, and insoluble reality of grief. His lens fixes on such tactile objects as dust, hair strands, veiny hands, doorframes—peripheral details that, in their studied deployment, cohere into an eloquent expression of Colton's soft lament or Whitney's disillusionment. That same quality inheres in the industrializing enclaves that surround Colton, Kyle, and Whitney: unfinished homes, tractors, boom trucks—grinding, ploughing machines of change that serve as a fitting abstraction for the experience of adolescence, and particularly that of these specific teens, who cannot seem to keep the things they love in front of them. Construction apparatuses seem to promise a future while havocking a past; such is the temper of a film like this, which recognizes how nostalgia has the power to both delight and eviscerate.

About halfway through *The Maiden*—bisecting the film's two emotionally congruent narratives before swapping out Colton's perspective for Whitney's—we witness a student slice clean through three of his fingers in shop class. The fallout is swift: a pair of unnamed onlookers rush the hallways in a choreographed zigzag, pausing at every classroom door to proclaim that "Terry MacDonald cut his fingers off." Seemingly discordant alongside the film's otherwise measured action, this injury (quietly observed by Colton) actualizes Kyle's violent offscreen death, reminding these teenagers of life's vicious, arbitrary licks. In that sense, *The Maiden* is a cautionary tale about youth, not as something to be gradually forsaken, but as a charged, eruptive piece of memory which will never go quietly. The people within it, too, populate our psyches long after they are gone, coursing through love songs or poetry, locomotives, and black cats. No one is ever really gone, Foy tells us, and we stand to meet ourselves and each other again and again.

Poet

Darezhan Omirbaev, Kazakhstan

BY GIOVANNI MARCHINI CAMIA

The case of Darezhan Omirbaev reminds us that in cinema, the line between eminence and obscurity can be very fine indeed. Throughout his career, which is now in its fourth decade, the Kazakh filmmaker has received official approbation in the form of awards at Cannes and Locarno, as well as high praise from notable colleagues (Godard, Garrel) and critics (Kent Jones, Alexander Horwath). And yet his work remains all but undistributed, and even the arrival, following an interval of nine years, of not one but two new films—the feature *Poet* (2021) and the 30-minute *Last Screening* (2022)—within a space of months, elicited hardly any fanfare until the Viennale celebrated the occasion by dedicating the fourth issue of the lovely polyphonic journal *Textur* to Omirbaev's oeuvre.

If *Poet* can be read as a comment on this state of affairs, though, Omirbaev himself is taking it in stride. As signalled from the very first shot, the protagonist, Didar, functions as a stand-in for the director, making *Poet* the latest in a series of semi-autobiographical portraits that comprises *Kairat* (1992), *Cardiogram* (1995), and *The Road* (2001). The film opens with the image of a postcard taped to a kitchen wall: a picture of a lone man on a waterfront during a storm, grasping a tall thin tree with both hands and fighting to keep it upright against the wind. The camera lingers on this image for a moment before panning over to the table and alighting on Didar's hands, which are scribbling a poem on a sheet of paper. Recalling iconic images of similar trees in Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* (1960) and Tarkovsky's *The Sacrifice* (1986), the postcard thus suggests a symbolic equivalence between poetry and cinema, while also offering an illustration of the film's subject—namely, the struggle of the artist against the forces that sway our world.

Poet underlines the permanence of this condition by alternating between two narrative timelines: one set in the present, and the other stretching from 1846 to 1974. Consistent with Omirbaev's abiding interest in representing his characters' subconscious, the latter timeline plays out in Didar's imagination. At various moments, which introduce or conclude a shift back in time, he is seen reading a book about Makhambet Otemisuly, a Kazakh poet and resistance fighter who led a rebellion against Russian colonialism in the early 19th century. The fact that the same actor, Yerdos Kanayev, plays both Didar and Makhambet at once emphasizes the parallels between the two stories and pokes fun at Didar's vanity—and, by extension, Omirbaev's—for comparing himself to a national hero. When Makhambet is introduced in the first reverie/flashback, he has quit his revolutionary activities and retired to the steppe with his family. A group of the khan's henchmen pay him a visit and pass along an offer to clean his slate; in exchange, he must write poems honouring the khan to be published in Russia, where there exists "a machine that puts words on paper."

The arrival of modernity, which within a few decades will take the Kazakh people out of nomadism, is mirrored in the present-tense sections of the film by the ostentatious international brands and digital screens that stick out in an urban landscape still bearing the visible marks of the Communist era. Correspondingly, history repeats itself when Didar meets a member of the contemporary ruling class, a businessman who looks like, and might well be, a gangster. As if his entourage of black-clad men driving a black Mercedes and a black Cadillac SUV weren't sufficient to convey that impression, he even quotes the most famous line from *The Godfather* (1972) when offering the cash-strapped poet an attractive sum of money to write a book about his family history.

Such hackneyed catchphrases notwithstanding, Didar—unlike Makhambet, who spurned the khan's wishes and paid with his life—is at liberty to refuse this offer, and spends the rest of the film deliberating with himself whether or not he should. In parallel to Didar's vacillation, the secondary narrative chronicles the efforts by successive generations to keep Makhambet's memory alive. After his body is exhumed from a secret grave, by which point Kazakhstan had become part of the USSR, his remains are unceremoniously passed along in a crate from home to home in the hope that the long-gestating plans for a mausoleum will eventually be realized.

Like much of the film, the businessman scene, with its caricatural touches played straight, is exquisitely comical. Although Omirbaev is an avowed Bressonian, and the actors in many of his films can be considered "models," Didar's impassivity is equally indebted to Buster Keaton in the way it serves as a mirror to societal injustice. Given the contemporary context, one could compare this use of deadpan to that of fellow Keaton disciple Elia Suleiman, except it doesn't share any of the latter's condescension. Whereas Suleiman's humour relies on a mix of hyperbole and ridicule, here a precise economy of gestures—for example, the simple succession of cuts from the Mercedes, to Didar's face, to the Cadillac, and back to his unchanging countenance—encapsulates the absurdity of the situation, giving eloquent and very funny expression to Didar's feelings of inadequacy and simmering envy. Omirbaev thus manages to endow his criticism with immense empathy and not blunt its edge.

When, later, the narrative repeatedly departs into dream and scenes become more elaborate, Omirbaev maintains the same levelness of tone. Heartened (and flattered) by an official invitation to give a poetry reading in another city, Didar delays giving an answer to the businessman's offer. After an overnight train ride and another night spent at the home of the head of the local cultural department (they didn't have the budget for a hotel), Didar is brought to the surpassingly unimposing "Palace of Culture" to find that a single person has come to hear his poetry. The following day, he goes on a radio show where the host introduces him by talking about the increasing irrelevance of literature in the present era. Her speech spills over into the next scene, which shows Didar roaming an electronics store; eventually, that voiceover is replaced by the diegetic cacophony of the myriad devices on display, but it's only when Didar plugs a pen drive into a computer and the previous scene of his interview starts playing on all the screens that we realize we're watching a dream. And it's only after the show host asks him, "What gives you strength against the tide?" and he's prevented from answering by an alarm going off simultaneously in the radio station and the electronics store, that we realize the interview was also part of the dream.

Up until this sequence, which functions as *Poet*'s climax by staging a confrontation between art and capital that impels Didar to finally make his decision, the last chapter of the film is a transplanted but otherwise mostly faithful adaptation of Hermann Hesse's 1913 autobiographical short story "Autorenabend." The one major alteration is the lone woman attending the reading: whereas in the original a sparse crowd shows up and quickly dissipates upon realizing that Hesse isn't going to entertain them with jokes, here Didar doesn't get to read any of his poems. It's the woman who stands up, a desolate figure in the middle of the large and empty auditorium, and gives a brief speech, thanking him for writing verses that gave her strength through her life's hardest moments and "for being a poet in such a difficult age."

Attesting to Omirbaev's humanism, the fact that the woman struggles with a speech impediment isn't used for laughs, but rather affirms the sincerity of her sentiment and renders it all the more affecting. She concludes by reciting one of Didar's poems back to him, and the film then cuts to Didar being driven home while the woman's voice continues on the soundtrack. Miraculously, she now speaks with perfect fluency, her tribute offering solace to the humbled poet along with a galvanizing demonstration of the transformative power of art.

Viking

Stéphane Lafleur, Canada

BY ANGELO MUREDDA

"It's something I need to do," phys-ed teacher David (Steve Laplante) unconvincingly tells his long-suffering wife Isabelle (Marie-Laurence Moreau) about the space-simulation program he's signed up for early in Stéphane Lafleur's *Viking*, a droll, bone-dry satire of escapism and white-collar office workers' delusions of grandeur. A step up in thematic complexity, concept, and set design from the charmingly small-scale *Tu dors Nicole* (2014), *Viking* mines a similar thematic vein to that film about an insomniac small-town woman whose dispiriting environment is punctuated by her incongruent visions of a world beyond it. Here, too, Lafleur employs magic realism to probe the tension between David's lofty self-image and earthbound surroundings, his frequent astral projections of himself into the vast expanse of space taking him light years away from the drab, sub-community-college-level theatre project he's actually enrolled in. While this oscillation between the quotidian real and the interstellar imaginary gets a bit precious at times, the film's own anthropological investigation of the way people willingly offer themselves up in service of dubious projects in order to feel part of something bigger and better than the world at their doorstep is absorbing and mordantly funny.

The Viking Society that David has committed himself to, we learn, is an experimental offshoot of the Canadian Space Agency that tasks a quintet of civilians to mimic the daily behavioural patterns and interpersonal tensions of their doppelgängers, genuine astronauts on the first manned flight to Mars. Each day, this B-team studies their counterparts' logs (spit out of an analogue machine in what look like punch cards), which mostly chart their petty grievances against their colleagues. They then recalibrate their own behaviour for their handlers' benefit, taking the utmost care to match their alpha double in everything from inter-office arguments about borrowed pens, to crushes, to masturbation habits, apparently unbothered by the implication that they are subjecting themselves to a mass-behaviour data-harvesting effort.

The goal, the project's self-enchanted superior tells them, alternating between folksy bromides in French and English (which gestures to the project's Canadian sheepishness, the B-team sidling up to the A-team like a kid brother), is to address the so-called "human problems" of the mission before they bubble up into full-on crises, observing how they might play out in this controlled environment on Earth. "Simulation, comprehension, solution," the boss quips, his company line about managing workplace challenges by play-acting them soon becoming a mantra for ultimate yes-man David, who, along with his teammates, has been chosen not for his scientific prowess but rather because of his personal similarities to his in-mission double, John.

The deadpan, taciturn Laplante is a perfect lodestar for *Viking*'s own aesthetic project. His simultaneously wistful and slumped energy puts a human face on Lafleur's exploration of daydreaming as an inevitably disappointing path to self-fulfillment outside of humdrum family and work life, as well as the limitations of acting in the face of the material realities of one's surroundings. Lafleur's humanism is at its most compelling when the gap between actor and character, and their respective environments, is at its most pronounced, and the B-team is left to figure out who they actually are outside of the cryptic notes their counterparts feed them. Though the characters begin as ciphers, dupes of astronauts neither we nor they have met, genuine drama naturally sprouts whenever the actors' commitment to the bit comes up against the shabbiness of their surroundings, as when they are holed up in a nondescript bunker or shuttled to and from the fake Red Planet (actually a desert) by a school bus whose doorway is too narrow for their seemingly genuine space suits to comfortably squeeze through.

The B-team's off-script intermingling also adds a spiky texture and friction to a film that is otherwise low on narrative incident. There's real pathos to a moment where David's closest in-mission collaborator, a soft-spoken woman named Marie-Josée (Larissa Corriveau) who is playing a man named Steven, ambiguously confides that "Steven"—she doesn't specify which one—"feels down." This furtive exchange, taking place as they're alone together on the desert plain that is decidedly not Mars, becomes the equivalent of a cigarette break on company time: the real reason wage workers continue to show up to their menial jobs.

Real characters soon emerge from the husk of the prescribed ones as that genuine human connection, coaxed out of the most stultifying preparations and rehearsals, snowballs, with Marie-Josée going so far as to reveal to David her real name, the ultimate taboo. When the project organizers start to notice these tiny fissures in "Steven's" façade and entreat David to turn against her by noting that she was only the third choice for her role, David is forced for the first time to be something like a real person: to square his commitment to the clearly deflating mission, which may or may not manifest in a real place on a real probe to Mars that his superiors dangle before him, with his growing attachment to the real Marie-Josée. It's heady stuff, anchored in plausibly low-key situations and in Laplante and Corriveau's tentative but yearning body chemistry.

Much as the Viking Society is threatened by these faint sparks of rebellion when the B-team goes off-book, *Viking*'s own project is occasionally dampened by its persistent cuteness. Lafleur's affinity for shot–reverse shot deadpan joke set-ups when the group members hash out their characters' grievances in the bunker feels a bit on the nose at times. The cast admittedly revels in these moments: Denis Houle's mix of masculine brusqueness and prissiness is funny in spite of the overplayed joke that he's depicting a woman named Liz; Fabiola N. Aladin gently underplays a wallflower tasked with convincingly inhabiting the character of Janet, an officious bully, shrinking even as she professes to take up more space; Hamza Haq, frequently stone-faced in the Canadian network drama *Transplant*, is particularly charming, casually flitting in and out of English and French and relishing the dull pronunciation of his unevocative character name, "Gary." Yet despite the cast's comedic adroitness, there is a strained levity to some of the absurdist character exchanges, and an over-reliance on flat-affect reaction shots that lends the film the air of a pilot for a high-concept office sitcom about human foibles in the Michael Schur mould.

In spite of these genre hang-ups, and the ill fortune to come out in the shadow of Nathan Fielder's series *The Rehearsal* (its own termite-art doppelgänger, due to its similar preoccupation with best laid plans and the human contingencies that thwart them), *Viking* works well as a humanist satire. While its design language is a bit more derivative than the science-fiction touchstones it cites—the opening personality test that matches David to John recalls the Voight–Kampff test in *Blade Runner* (1982), while a gorgeous two-shot of "John" and "Steven" suited up and plotting out of the earshot of "Janet" evokes *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)—DP Sara Mishara's understated images of the crew puttering about in space suits in the arid desert at dusk, their faces lit only by the torch lights in their helmets, are no less striking for it. And Lafleur's minimalist aesthetic pays off beautifully when the B-team's incalculable dynamics force a rewrite of the script, the human element the project organizers sought to control reasserting itself messily against every attempt to do so.

Lars' Anatomy

The Kingdom Returns

The Kingdom: Exodus (2022), the long-delayed third and final installment of Lars von Trier and Morten Arnfred's supernatural television series, is kind of stupid. This doesn't mean that *Exodus* isn't enjoyable (it very much is), or that it lacks merit (it does not). But seen for itself, and in relation to its two earlier installments (1994/1996), the new series mostly seems like an extended jape, characterized by von Trier's knowing mockery of both himself and the very idea of "peak TV." Granted, *The Kingdom* was always little more than a portentous gag, using campfire ghost-story hokum to introduce various ideas (body horror, institutional indifference, the arrogance of medical science) in order to treat them, if not trivially, then with a somewhat limited sense of purpose.

Von Trier developed *The Kingdom* for Danish TV network DR after completing his first three features, and considered in that context, one can certainly perceive a learning curve. In making the first two seasons of *The Kingdom*, von Trier explores what would become his primary artistic preoccupation: the coexistence of good and evil. But he did so in the broadest, most declarative manner possible, creating a tale of suppressed demons bubbling up to the surface while spiking the punch with some well-honed embarrassment comedy. (Ernst-Hugo Järegård's performance as the arrogant, beleaguered Dr. Helmer, railing against "Danish scum," lingers in the mind long after the crying ghosts in the elevator have evaporated from memory.)

The first series of *The Kingdom* was quite a bit more invested in its haunted-hospital conceit than subsequent seasons. Dr. Helmer's malpractice, which resulted in permanent brain damage for a young patient named Mona (Laura Christensen), was regarded with considerable poignancy, with the humane young Dr. Krogshøj (Søren Pilmark) placing a miniature grave for Mona on his private monument to the Rigshospitalet's medical malfeasance. This small gesture—"It seems like someone should remember"—is repeated verbatim in Stephen King's single-season ABC-TV adaptation *Kingdom Hospital*, suggesting that King too saw it as a major thematic moment. It echoes quite directly with the opening sequence used for all three series, which explains that the hospital stands on the former site of "the bleaching ponds" where poor Danes would stand in giant chemical pools toiling away for the textile industry. Harking back to Gothic literature, *The Kingdom* used the ghost story as a way to consider history as a vertical time structure, a way to literalize the hold of the past on the present.

But by *Kingdom II*, von Trier seems less interested in the hospital as a space of reckoning. The last image of the first *Kingdom* remains indelible, as Dr. Judith Petersen (Birgitte Raaberg) is shown giving birth to a mutant ghost baby, the bloody adult head of Udo Kier emerging from between her legs. The fate of this enormous man-child, named "Little Brother" in *Kingdom II* and "Big Brother" in *Exodus*, becomes one of *The Kingdom*'s primary plot strands, and it tends to signify von Trier's loss of interest in real-world matters like the abuses of science and industry on the Danish people. Instead, Kier's malformed sacrificial lamb permits *The Kingdom* to double down on its most obtuse, lunkheaded ideas. The Brother is the spawn of Satan himself, and his death and (partial) resurrection sets the stage of *Exodus*' showdown against the Prince of Darkness, known here as the Grand Duc. Von Trier certainly understands that the devil is in the details, and *Exodus* takes great delight in revealing the Grand Duc as a surprise movie-star cameo.

It's all quite diverting, to be sure, even if the final two episodes of *Exodus* suffer from sloppy pacing and a lack of focus. A well-constructed television show staves off monotony by flitting back and forth between multiple plot strands, and this is something at which von Trier is very adroit. To be fair, though, his co-director Arnfred appears to have focused his own career on genre work, and so it's entirely possible that his formal contribution to the series has been underappreciated, and that Arnfred may in fact be Mark Frost to von Trier's David Lynch.

Nevertheless, if *The Kingdom* gradually reveals itself to be a case of diminishing returns, that's because the series initially asks to be taken somewhat seriously as an artistic enterprise, but winds up abandoning any pretense of commentary or real-world purchase in favour of a cosmic shaggy-dog story that insists on pointing out how self-aware it is of its overall lack of substance. Starting out on solid ground, *The Kingdom* quite deliberately wanders into the weeds.

But it's important to put the series into context. *The Kingdom* was pivotal to von Trier's development as a filmmaker. The first two *Kingdom* series were completed following his commercial breakthrough *Europa* (1991), and just before his artistic breakthrough with *Breaking the Waves* (1996). So if von Trier used *The Kingdom* to workshop his material, learning how to transform religious and philosophical inquiry into broad thematic strands, some of the Manichean simplicity of the first two series is entirely forgivable. And while von Trier's subsequent filmography contains its fair share of missteps, he certainly embarked on far less cartoonish considerations of desire and ethics. *Dogville* (2003) is probably the high-water mark for von Trier's explorations of everyday depravity, but there is also much to be said for *Antichrist* (2009) and its hysterical deep dive into Western misogyny, not to mention von Trier's own self-portrait as a deluded, mediocre sadist in *The House That Jack Built* (2018).

Wherever one stands on von Trier and his divisive oeuvre, it's clear that the enduring popularity of *The Kingdom* is due, at least in part, to its blatant lack of seriousness. A bit like the underrated *The Boss of It All* (2006), *The Kingdom* is von Trier's version of light entertainment. As such, it has proven highly influential. It's the kind of work that is so transparent in its aims that it can serve as a fairly legible road map for directors and showrunners of the future. In the intervening years, traces of *The Kingdom* can be found nearly everywhere, from its self-conscious adaptation of the medical drama into a campy soap opera, to its reliance on hoary supernatural tropes. Very few current Netflix series would be thinkable without *The Kingdom*, and it looks very much like a major signpost on the road to today's "elevated horror."

But *Exodus* is a slightly different matter. Considered strictly from the point of view of TV production, it can be seen as von Trier's attempt at a victory lap, taking advantage of the contemporary audience's relative comfort with *Twin Peaks*, *Stranger Things*, *The X-Files*, *Fringe*, the German series *Dark*, and other entries that hinge on the inter-dimensional polarity of light and dark. It's easy to consider the original *Kingdom* "ahead of its time," despite the fact that it was actually quite popular in its day.

But if we look at *The Kingdom* as a stage in von Trier's creative development, there's not much reason to return to this well. When *The House That Jack Built* was released, fans and detractors alike wondered where von Trier could possibly go next, since the film was a virtual *cri de coeur* of self-lacerating artistic regret, one that ends with the filmmaker summarily sending his onscreen avatar (Matt Dillon) straight to hell. It'd be inaccurate to charge *The Kingdom: Exodus* with being a cynical cash grab, but it absolutely is a kind of cash grab with scare quotes, a return to a cornier, dumbed-down von Trier that goes to great lengths to mock its own idiocy. It anticipates any criticism you might lob at it, and simply shrugs.

Every episode of *The Kingdom* ends with von Trier delivering a retrospective summary and interpretation of the show we've just watched. (It's a show that incorporated its own recaps, long before that practice became the de facto format for television criticism.) This continues in *Exodus*, with a slight difference. Lars speaks from behind a curtain, with only his shoes poking out. He says that he is vain about the fact that he's aged, and doesn't want to be on camera

anymore. But von Trier abandons the recap format in the fourth and final episode of *Exodus*, instead offering a director's statement in the end credits: "Everything is stolen."

This is von Trier using the language of postmodernism, appropriation, and pastiche to remind us that *The Kingdom* is essentially a put-on. It would be impossible for any halfway attentive viewer to miss *Exodus'* citations of Lynch, Maddin, Tarkovsky, *Ghostbusters*, *St. Elsewhere*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and dozens of other reference points. But above all, *Exodus* steals from *The Kingdom* itself. Instead of making a virtue of necessity, *Exodus* casts necessity as a set of cheap gags and knowing winks.

Given the advanced age of most of the key personnel, it's no surprise that nearly all of the lead actors from the first two series have since passed on. No matter: Järegård is replaced by Mikael Persbrandt, who plays "Halfmer," Stig Helmer's son. Moesgaard (Holger Juul Hansen), the hospital's dithering chief of staff, is gone, and in his place we have Pontopidan (Lars Mikkelsen), a slight variation on the original character. And the role of Mrs. Drusse (Kirsten Rolffes), the paranormal investigator from the first two *Kingdoms*, is now occupied by Karen Svennson (Bodil Jørgensen), a fan of the Danish TV series *The Kingdom* who wants to infiltrate the hospital to find out what happened to the doctors, patients, and restless spirits from the end of *The Kingdom II*.

That's right, *Exodus* introduces a Möbius narrative logic whereby the original Lars von Trier series *The Kingdom* exists within the diegetic world of *Exodus*. Nurses and orderlies complain about "that stupid show" that gave the (real) medical staff such a bad reputation, while the halls of the hospital are occasionally clogged with fans, led on tours by a guide who cheekily admits that *Kingdom II* was a disappointment. But make no mistake: *Exodus* does nothing noteworthy with this sequel-as-second-order-fandom conceit. (Tom Six actually applies it more systematically in his *Human Centipede* sequels.) This is simultaneously von Trier's half-assed attempt at retconning *Exodus* into semi-conformity with the earlier series, *and* his snarky nose-thumbing at the very idea of the retcon, a reminder that TV has rules, but those rules are silly, because at its core TV is silly too.

Most reviews of *Exodus* compare it to *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017), and that is understandable. David Lynch got funding from Showtime to produce the new series 25 years after its last installment, the theatrical feature *Fire Walk With Me* (1992). Likewise, von Trier and Arnfred unveiled *Exodus* at the Venice Film Festival a full 25 years after the broadcast of *The Kingdom II*. There are also quite obvious formal and thematic connections. Both series consider human misdeeds to be outward expressions of a struggle between good and evil on a more universal plane (cf. *Twin Peaks*' White and Black Lodges), and the expansiveness of series television permitted Lynch, like von Trier, to pull his viewers out of the cosmic battle with off-the-wall humour. The inept hospital chiefs of staff, for example, could be compared with *Twin Peaks*' childlike Deputy Andy (Harry Goaz); the brusque Drs. Helmer and "Halfmer" align quite well with the dyspeptic Albert Rosenthal (Miguel Ferrer); and the dishwashers who work in the hospital's basement (Vita Jensen and Morten Rotne Leffers in the first two *Kingdoms*, Jesper Sørensen and the voice of Jasmin Junker in *Exodus*), providing cryptic but insightful commentary, are a bit like Margaret the Log Lady (Catherine Coulson).

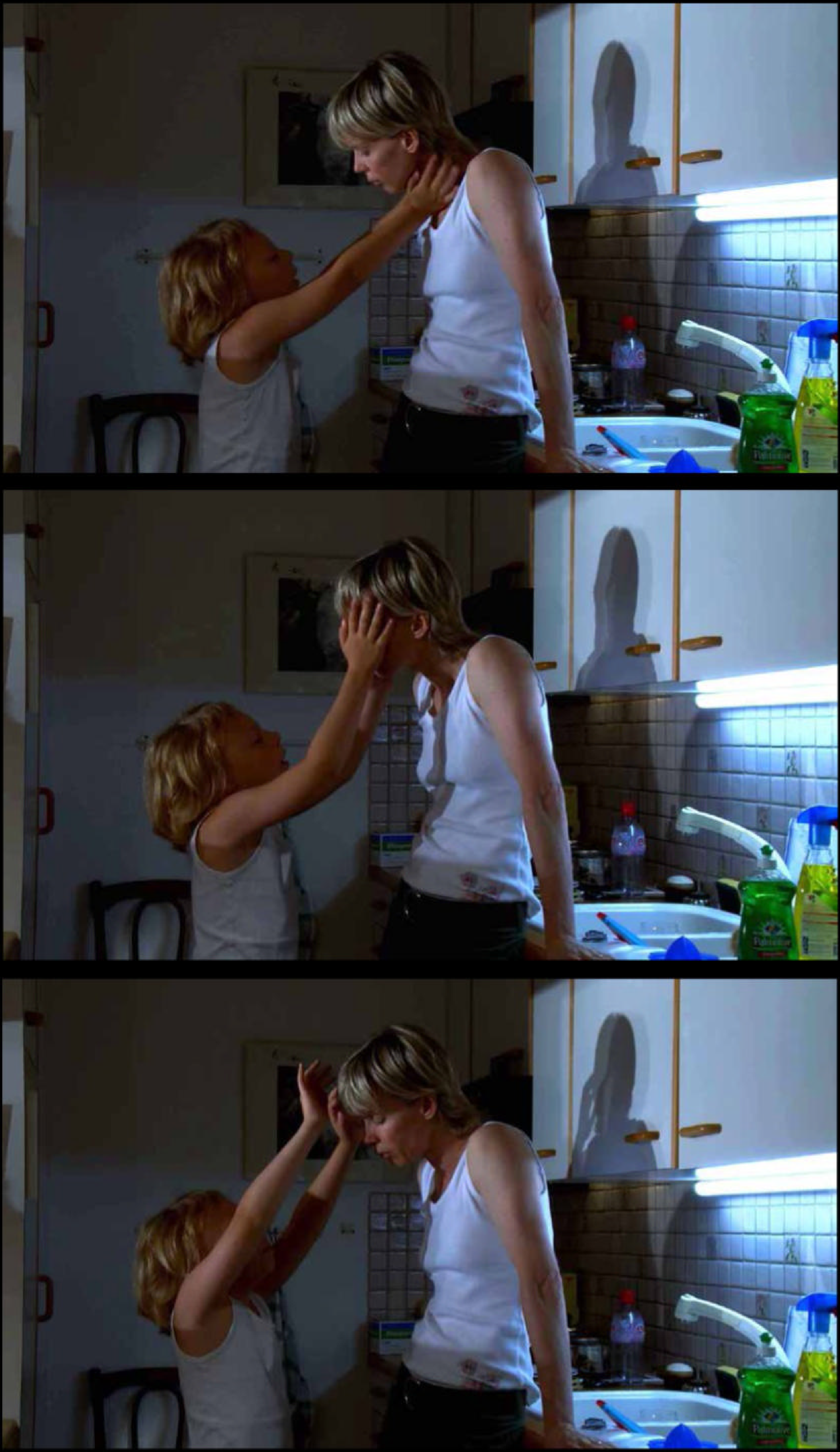
Exodus, fitfully amusing as it is, does not really compare with *The Return*, because von Trier takes very few risks with it. But more than this, both belated third-series installments are firmly grounded in the aesthetic temperaments of their makers. Von Trier quite fashionably situates his project in irony, undercutting any moral or ethical intimations that bubble up in *The Kingdom*. Like a skilled magician who harbours doubts about the validity of his trade, von Trier can't help following each well-executed trick with passive-aggressive stage patter: "We all know how this is done, right?" By contrast, Lynch approaches even his surrealist comedic flourishes with absolute sincerity. *Exodus* may not be especially concerned with the fates of Karen, Mrs. Drusse, Mona, or Big Brother. *The Return*, like the entirety of *Twin Peaks*, cares very deeply about Laura Palmer.

But the comparison is misleading in more significant ways. Von Trier is frequently arch in his creations, and Lynch disarmingly openhearted, but this is only half the story. As we have seen, in both certain of his films (*Antichrist*, *The House That Jack Built*) and his infamous 2011 Cannes press conference for *Melancholia* ("I understand Hitler," a statement borne from frank acknowledgment of and disgust with his own authoritarian tendencies), the world has a habit of responding quite poorly when Lars von Trier speaks from the heart. This is probably more a sign of the times than any particular animus toward von Trier, since the scumbags among us are now expected to perform liberalism's deferential shim-sham, not to come clean as part of the problem.

So if we recognize that the current state of arts funding offers more options for television than for cinema, and that for-profit entertainment concerns have much more faith in content with a pre-existing brand ("intellectual property"), then there are clear financial reasons for the existence of *Exodus*, *The Return*, Olivier Assayas' *Irma Vep* series (2022), and *Exterior Night* (2022), Marco Bellocchio's serialization of the Aldo Moro kidnapping, a topic he already explored with *Good Morning, Night* (2003). Major film artists are expected to build on their "brand," and adapt it to the current demands of the marketplace, which is dominated by streaming and not theatrical exhibition. Serialized narratives are seen as better suited to over-the-top distribution, despite the fact that the pause button can theoretically "serialize" anything.

For von Trier, it's not just that returning to *The Kingdom* made good economic sense. *Exodus* doesn't just jump-start an old, well-regarded TV show: it gives the people the Lars they apparently want, and keeps the *persona non grata* under wraps—a self-erasure that *Exodus* openly mocks by hiding its creator behind a red *Twin Peaks*-ish curtain. The von Trier that is most reliably bankable, the one least likely to "get cancelled" in both senses of the word (TV programming and culture-war lingo), is the one who carefully couches any aesthetic predilection inside a thick husk of sarcasm and genre play.

After all, if everything is stolen, then there is no author to hold responsible, no one to stand bare-chested in the arena, putting his ugliest preoccupations on display and announcing *ecce homo*. Fittingly, *The Kingdom: Exodus* ends with the final victory of the Grand Duc, the destruction of nearly every character, and a final shot of the Rigshospitalet exploding into a glowing cloud of neon dust. In fact, it looks an awful lot like the scene in *The Dark Knight* (2008) when the Joker blows up Gotham General Hospital with an amusingly faulty detonator. *The Kingdom: Exodus*, like *The Dark Knight*, firmly establishes two simple facts: there's no escape from branded IP, and all the world loves a clown.



Week-end

Godard, Tanner, and Switzerland

When the death of Jean-Luc Godard was announced on September 13, 2022, it seemed that the French New Wave itself had died. That impression, led by a baby-boomer understanding of Godard's work, flows from the double assumption that the Swiss-born Godard was basically French, and that his important work was basically a matter of about a dozen films made over less than a full decade, from *À bout de souffle* (1960) to *Week-end* (1967). After that he moved to the Alps, or Switzerland, or something, and then sort of went off the rails.

The death of Alain Tanner two days prior to Godard could have pre-empted some of this nostalgic reductionism, but of course it didn't work out that way. Compared to Godard, Tanner seemed to be an entirely different figure: a Swiss filmmaker who was clearly *from* Switzerland, an intellectual anchor of that small cinema with some modest acclaim outside, both in Europe and North America. His most famous film, *Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l'an 2000* (1976), has a cast of characters held back by their nostalgia for the '60s, and is clear-eyed about both the loss such nostalgia brings, and the tasks that lay ahead for people claiming to subscribe to the cause of radical politics. That clarity is due in part to the film's screenplay by John Berger (in the last of Berger's three feature-film collaborations with Tanner, following *La Salamandre* [1971] and *Le milieu du monde* [1974]), but it also flows from Tanner's severe but suggestive style—which itself derives, in part, from cinematographer Renato Berta, who shot all three of the Berger–Tanner features, many of Tanner's other films, as well as Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *History Lessons* (1972), *Moses and Aaron* (1975), and *Fortini/Cani* (1977), and, at around this same time in the late '70s, Godard's *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* (1980).

It's thus we approach the nub of what really died, near simultaneously, across about nine weeks in the autumn of 2022, once we add Straub's death (on November 20) to those of Tanner and Godard: the vision of a European cinema that could incorporate radical politics,

Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l'an 2000

poetry, landscape, and realist idealism, has now passed on from this life in a quick but steady progression. The two greatest of Swiss filmmakers, Godard and Tanner, spent the better part of their careers wrestling with Straub–Huillet's set of interests—the long take, a preoccupation with literature's influence on cinema, and the quest for a radical-political *form*—while Straub, for his part, returned the favour by becoming a sort of special cousin, or perhaps wise but batty uncle, to Swiss cinema. (A spokesman for the Cinémathèque Suisse was referring to that particular institution, but could have been talking about Swiss cinema as a whole when he told *The Guardian*, upon Straub's death, that "We were very, very close to him.")

For Tanner, these interests were bound up with the making of films in a recognizably European *cinéma d'auteur* way, but in such a manner that it could incorporate serious political and historical considerations within a renewed engagement with form. The complex tracking shot in *Jonas*' second classroom sequence, in which the slightly batty history teacher (Jacques Denis) offers his analysis of the meaning of time and revolution ("In a total synthesis, time disappears!" he shouts as he leads his students drumming on their desks), is of a piece with an equally complex pair of long takes that has the camera moving gracefully around a gently lit table where a goofy extended family is having their evening soup. The Straub–Huilletian approach to duration is all there: these are self-consciously unblinking images, disdaining the cop-out of continuity editing but allowing for flashes of clarity and insight that emerge through the choreography of the camera. The sequence, like most of *Jonas*, is gentle, warm, and loving—values that, in the final analysis, are also present in Straub–Huillet films like *Moses and Aaron*, but which, *chez* Tanner, are foregrounded rather than most readily available to the most patient and open-minded viewers.

The famous Marguerite Duras sequence in *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* has a comparable spirit: we never see Duras, but we hear her voice over some fairly straightforward continuity editing of a scene between Jacques Dutronc and Nathalie Baye, creating an effect that is odd to the point of being semi-alienating, with a little dash of the meta-literary. The next sequence sees Dutronc and Baye playing out their straightforward lover's quarrel, first in the video-inflected slow motion that defined a lot of Godard's style of this period, and then (after just a bit of continuity editing) in a long take, a *plan-américain* in which the two shout at each other. We see here a gently Straub–Huilletian approach to narrative: these are images that are in an explicit dialogue with the literary, rendered in such a way that the viewer is mostly kept at a distance, refusing a mimetic sound–image relationship but allowing for flashes of emotional connection that emerge through a rigorous attention to mise en scène.

Jonas and *Sauve qui peut* are not Straub–Huilletian in the manner of someone like Pedro Costa, the Franco-German couple's clearest inheritor and one who makes far fewer concessions to his viewer. Rather, these two films are the high point of a movement in Swiss cinema, where Straub–Huillet had an unusual importance as models (rather in the manner of Godard in Québec): a movement to bring the most advanced thinking in the aesthetics and the politics of cinema to a wider audience, which both Tanner and Godard sought to advance through their television work.

When Godard and his partner (eventually wife) Anne-Marie Miéville moved to Grenoble in the early '70s, they set up a kind of "video workshop" that they named Sonimage, and started experimenting with the electronic medium and its connections with broadcast. The most fully realized of these experiments were the 12-part, 10-hour *Six fois deux / Sur et sous la communication* (1976) and the 12-part, five-hour *France/tour/détour/deux/enfants* (1977). I confess to finding the former both cryptic and overly didactic, although it is clearly what began Godard's process of using video to think about images, a process that concluded with his massive *Histoire(s) du cinéma* project (1988–1998), another work I find both cryptic and didactic. *France/tour/détour/deux/enfants*, on the other hand, has some genuinely revelatory lyricism (especially when it comes to the treatment of childhood), and served as a trial run for the distinctly video-inflected slow motion that would define *Sauve qui peut (la vie)*, whose UK release title was *Slow Motion*. That is to say, when Godard and Miéville turned to television, the results were wildly variable: sometimes preposterously hermetic and in-

Les hommes du port

dicative of his worst tendencies (and hers too, in terms of encouraging archly formal performances, something that recurs in her own feature-length films), sometimes quite wondrous and indicative of his best (and hers too, especially when it comes to capturing the distinct worldviews of the young and the aging, which we see in her short *Le livre de Marie* [1984] and her Godard-starring feature *Après la reconciliation* [2000]).

Tanner, on the other hand, used television as a sketchpad for the films that would follow years later. His early works for Télévision Suisse Romande, some of which were made in collaboration with Berger, are subtly photographed but marked by a tentative tone, as though Tanner knew he had stumbled along some terrific material but didn't quite know what to make of it. I have in mind especially his portraits of the dissident nuclear scientist Mike Pence (*Mike et l'usage de la science*, 1968), a country doctor (*Docteur B., médecin de campagne*, 1968), and a group of post–Six Day War Israelis (*La Troupe de music hall – Danser sur un volcan*, 1969). These are wondrous pieces of modest television documentary, shot and assembled with a looseness that is of a piece with their status as relatively early examples of the form. That openness to the unexpected, along with an eye for striking images (notably in *Docteur B.*, with its beautiful images of winter), set the tone for the feature-narrative work Tanner would go on to do. But these early Tanner films are not mere excuses to test out specific formal quirks (such as the Godard–Miéville-ian slow motion of, well, *Slow Motion*): rather, they show a filmmaker looking to engage with the world around him, and finding the cinematic tools that he would need for that basic task.

In retrospect, it's this sort of modest practicality that makes Tanner appear like the more sophisticated, serious artist and ciné-intellectual, with Godard a more unpredictable, ultimately shallower version of same. But there was a reckless fearlessness to Godard that, although it seemed to appear in work like *Week-end*, only fully emerged once he relocated to Switzerland and he and Miéville set out to be their own masters. Godard's independence of spirit (a quality that can sometimes resemble self-absorption) is just as consistent with Switzerland's distinct culture of radicalism as Tanner's Enlightenment-infused desire to evoke the complexity of the world around him.

Insularity and internationalism—those contradictory tendencies are at the heart of Swiss culture, and define the country's greatest postwar filmmakers (who are really the greatest filmmakers the country has ever produced). They are visible in equal parts in Godard and Tanner's twinned late masterpieces, both from 1995—*JLG/JLG: autoportrait de décembre* (which sees Godard ruminating in and around his home near Lac Léman, photographed with an intense and impossibly delicate beauty) and *Les hommes du port* (which presents the dockworkers of the port of Genoa in ways that give equal importance to the poetics of labour organizing and the demanding ballet of loading massive ships)—but also, in a broader way, in Tanner and Godard's respective home cantons. Godard was born in Paris, but the small Swiss town of Rolle, where he and Miéville wound up (along with Straub, who died there alongside his new partner, Barbara Ulrich), is in Vaud, a Francophone canton historically defined by an intense form of Protestantism. Obviously, Godard was never going to be a pastor like some of his ancestors, but that religious radicalism is not at all far from the spirit of his work, especially in its post-'68 manifestations. Tanner, on the other hand, built many of his films (explicitly so in the case of *Jonas*, implicitly in many others) around the thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose life in what was then the Republic of Geneva is inseparable from what he contributed to Enlightenment thinking about education and the social contract.

Without the spirit of *both* Geneva and Vaud, there is no modern Swiss culture, and without the spirit of *both* Tanner and Godard there would be no true Swiss cinema to speak of. Their passing, alongside that of Straub, marks the end of that national cinema's evolution into something more, something both deeply rooted and restlessly global. That "something more" gave subsequent generations of Swiss filmmakers a substantial legacy to build on. Whether they are up to the task remains to be seen, but thanks to these two seemingly opposite figures—and the outside interlocutor who was indeed very, very close to both of them—the task is clear.

La France contre les robots

Straub's Final Film(s)

When Jean-Marie Straub's *La France contre les robots*—filmed in December 2019 down the street from his apartment in Rolle—received an online premiere courtesy of Andy Rector's *Kino Slang* in May of 2020, it was a small beacon in dark times. Not that the film's life would have been any easier without the pandemic: let's not forget that the German premiere of Straub's penultimate film, the spectacular *Gens du lac* (2018), only occurred thanks to Klaus Volkmer at the Munich Film Museum, where it was shown with Vincente Minnelli's *The Band Wagon* (1953). With Straub's passing on November 20, 2022 at the age of 89, we can be thankful we received one last film and one that is every bit as radical, uncompromising and inspiring as what came before, no matter the form of its presentation. Two films, in fact.

Even had the film been shot a few months later, Straub would certainly not have tried out something new, as so many other filmmakers felt compelled to do the past two years. He and Danièle Huillet were never ones to do so. Although they made an impressively diverse array of films—shorts and features, landscapes, faces and accents of several countries in Europe, Africa, and the US, different formats from 16mm and 35mm to MiniDV and 2K—they stuck to a method, honing and refining it over many years.

While the 35mm black and white *Itinéraire de Jean Bricard* (2008) opens with one of Straub's finest studies of trees—and it is hard to think of other filmmakers who made stronger portraits of people reading—*La France contre les robots* returns to another significant motif of this cinema: walking. One thinks of the long, sinuous dolly shots through the Italian countryside in the second half of *From the Cloud to the Resistance* (1978) or a late work like *Un héritier* (2010), which features Straub himself walking in a kind of self-portraiture (the only handheld shots to appear in Straub–Huillet's films, moreover, were all done by Renato Berta). Like the incomparable (and uncopiable) diction in their films, Straub and Huillet filmed people strolling in a manner all their own—measured and insistent steps within compositions of luxurious nature. We know from friends and associates that the pair would often take long walks, sometimes just to save money, and that these same routes would often wind up in their films. This holds true for *La France contre les robots*, which this time recasts the walking in a striking manner.

Presented as two versions to be viewed back-to-back (something Straub had already insisted on for public screenings of the three versions of *Corneille-Brecht* [2009]), the film shows a man (Christophe Clavert) taking a contemplative winter constitutional alongside Lake Geneva, around sunset in version one and closer to midday in version two. In both takes/films, the man walks for nearly a minute before he begins to speak aloud, seemingly to himself but for us all to hear. Two things are immediately striking about this repeated shot: its intensely blue and violet hues (almost like a cyanotype) and the fact that Clavert is shown only in silhouette. We never see his face or his eyes.

Always looking towards the past while firmly planted in the present, Straub uses his source text here a book that one of his dearest authors, Georges Bernanos, wrote in 1945 as WWII came to an end and the exiled author observed events in Europe from Brazil. Hitler was defeated and the Allies were victorious, but Bernanos could already see what the postwar years would bring. Lifting verbatim from the book's second paragraph, but excising two sentences, Straub reimagines the words as the stroller's thoughts. As he enunciates each word and syllable clearly, he keeps his eyes on the ground before him.

His thoughts concern revolution in France today and the need for a total revolution, one that would overthrow the entirety of the existing system, wherein different ideologies, different nations, once thought in opposition to each other, have coalesced to profit from the expansion of capitalism and technology. He notes that "If we thought this system could reform itself...we would certainly refuse to run the risk capable of destroying precious things that will only be reconstructed with much time, perseverance, disinterest, and love." With this injunction—not so much a call to arms as the words of someone resigned to looking at things squarely—Straub generously gives viewers the space, time, and uncommon freedom to position themselves in relation to these words. He takes a few simple observations about our world and magnifies them, proposing we consider them in light of today and tomorrow (literally and figuratively). In miniature this time, but no different from grander mosaic-like works like *Operai, contadini* (2001) or *Il ritorno del figlio prodiguo/Umiliati* (2002), Straub–Huillet always present their characters to us non-judgmentally, with all their flaws and strengths, and open their films to the unexpected nuances nature can provide. The brilliant change in lighting and slight reframing (with their effect on colour and mood) between the two versions of *La France contre les robots* partakes in this method.

Starting with *The Death of Empedocles* in 1986, Straub and Huillet edited multiple versions of all their following films. Pedro Costa's *Où gît votre sourire enfoui* (2001) shows them editing the third version of *Sicilia!* Audiences have, however, rarely had the pleasure of seeing these different versions together and appreciating their subtle differences. Other than a brief period in Germany in the early '90s when all four versions of *Empedocles* were in distribution at once, it was probably not until the 2017 Berlin retrospective that these films were again shown together. Of course, while some differences are noticeable when viewing these versions together, appreciating the subtle effects these have on the drama is something of a challenge given the grand scale of film(s). In the more compact form of a short and with such remarkable contrasts, the two versions of *La France contre les robots* drive home the importance of this practice for the Straubs as well as the importance they allotted to chance when collaborating with nature. Speaking to *Cahiers du cinéma* together for the last time in 2006, they spoke of this in terms of a gift: "This gift is only possible through other gifts, those the actors make us, those the light makes, etc. But all the gifts can only be produced if there is a construction, an 'iron frame' as Fritz Lang used to say, and in which chance makes everything explode, shine through. That's it!"

The images in version one convey a strong sense of desperation, of forlornness. The man could easily be a distant relative of Ventura/"Faccia Cativa" in *Operai, contadini* or blind Tiresias in *From the Cloud to the Resistance*. The mood resembles that of *Il ritorno del figlio prodigy/Umiliati* too, a film dealing so bluntly with capitalist humiliation that it led Tag Gallagher to ask if the Straubs had even wanted to make it. At the same time, the camera is closer to the character in this version, slightly more intimate. Version two is comparably brighter (if not quite sunny) and the camera is slightly more distant, showing more of the figure. Two moods, two possibilities. And like that Bob Dylan box set that includes every take of every song from 1965-66, there are no bad versions.

As the man comes to the end of his thoughts, he slows down, stops, and, like so many of Straub–Huillet's characters before him, looks out and contemplates the horizon (see the endings of *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* [1968], *The Bridegroom, the Actress and the Pimp* [1968], *O Somma Luce* [2009], or *Operai, contadini*). He stiffens his back and declaims the film's closing line: "A world gained for Technology is lost for Liberty," before an abrupt cut to black ends the film. Similar to the final shot of *Umiliati,* a film in which, again, it really does seem like all is lost but where the camera's reframing of the actress' clenched fist transforms it into a symbol of political solidarity and strength, the man's posture and the camera's sudden stasis, for it too has stopped moving, convey more than his words: unyielding persistence in the face of the massive obstacles posed by all that humanity now faces.

ALL THE BEAUTY AND THE BLOODSHED

Laura Poitras, US

BY HADEN GUEST

All the Beauty and the Bloodshed is the third in a series of portrait films by Laura Poitras focused on prominent activists pitched in quixotic struggle against dark forces undergirding the US as a global capitalist superpower. Unlike the divisive figures engaged by her previous features—Edward Snowden and Julian Assange—Poitras' latest subject, Nan Goldin, could never be dismissed as a self-serving gadfly. An artist, witness, and survivor who has channelled her scarring life experiences, most notably opioid addiction, into her recent work valiantly fighting Big Pharma, Goldin brings a welcome human dimension to Poitras' larger project to empower dissent. Thus, while Poitras closely follows Goldin's spirited efforts to hold the Sackler family accountable for their willful profiteering from their signature product, the fatally addictive painkiller OxyContin, her documentary spends even more time plunging into the turbulent past of Goldin's life story and evolution as an artist and activist.

Crucial here is Poitras' embrace of the vital proto-cinema defined by the celebrated diaristic slideshows Goldin invented in the late '80s and inaugurated by *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. Goldin's pioneering slideshow explored portraiture and its live presentation as a means to empower a community by giving back its self-image, acting as its mirror, to paraphrase the title of her 1996 Whitney show, and capturing the very essence of a time and place even as it was disappearing. In this case, the time and place was the Bowery in all its tawdry beauty and sadness, in the midst of the AIDS crisis and at the end of the No Wave anti-renaissance. The raw frankness of Goldin's imagery continues to set her work apart, as does her courage to capture friends and acquaintances in their most intimate moments—fucking, shooting up, near death—while also including a series of devastating self-portraits, her face and one eye visibly damaged, battered and almost blinded by the same partner whose portraits recur throughout the slideshow.

Seen today, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* offers a sobering contrast to the pernicious image-based community of social media, despite the off-kilter claims frequently made that Goldin's work is its precursor. Yes, Goldin shared her portraits with her subjects, but she did so during participatory presentations to which her same subjects were invited in order to critique and edit the slideshows, removing or replacing images with which they were not comfortable. The economy of the image has changed dramatically since the late '80s, largely due to social media, and the cult of instant creation and sharing cuts in every way against the extended duration and patiently cumulative process of *The Ballad*. The searing poignancy of *The Ballad* lies in the deliberate measure and careful sequence of its images, the movement from one photo to the next evoking the passage of time, death, mourning, and the lasting fragility of photographic memory. The slideshow was made gradually and through open collaboration, a creative process that similarly grounds and strengthens *All the Beauty and the Bloodshed* as a film made in close creative partnership between two artists.

Images from *The Ballad* appear early in *All the Beauty and the Bloodshed* to set into motion the film's contrapuntal movement between present and past. On the one hand is a slightly clumsy vérité chronicle of P.A.I.N. (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now), the activist group founded by Goldin, that makes extensive use of footage of actions and "die-ins" largely shot by the group and not, it should be noted, by Poitras. On the other hand are the long audio-only interviews recorded by Poitras and accompanying images from Goldin's archive, including hitherto unseen early and family photographs. Among the most powerful moments of Poitras' film are these minimally accompanied still-image sequences that embody the profound empathy shared by Goldin's art and activism. In Goldin's photography, empathy emerges from a genuine contact between the viewer

and the profound intimacy and vulnerability embodied in her images. In *All the Beauty and the Bloodshed*, Poitras and Goldin offer a new slideshow in the spirit of Goldin's iconic work, focused on the artist's past and recalling her many struggles and hard-won triumphs: the difficult youth that unfolded after the death of her sister and after the teenage Goldin was placed in a foster home; her years of poverty and addiction; her stint as a sex worker; the deaths of too many of her friends from AIDS; and her crucial discovery of photography as a tool of survival and an indelible art of memory.

At key moments the extended slideshow that flows across *All the Beauty and the Bloodshed* pays homage to Goldin's older sister Barbara, who has long been a haunting referent of Goldin's art. Poitras allows Goldin to reveal the sad facts of her sister's brief life as a repressed queer rebel whose brave challenge to the status quo marked her as different, even dangerous, and led her parents to force her into a mental health institute where she was ultimately driven to take her own life. In the film's boldest yet unstated move, Poitras uses the figure of Goldin's sister to subtly bring together the two narrative strands of *All the Beauty* by revealing both sisters to be victims of an apathetic state whose health-care system seems purpose-built for complete indifference to those in need and seems, indeed, designed to exploit and destroy the weakest and most vulnerable.

In the moving preface to the book version of *The Ballad*, Goldin describes her photographs as a form of "real memory" that invoke "the color, smell, sound, and physical presence, the density and flavor of life." She further distinguishes these photographic memories from the invented "stories" used to render history as "memorized, encapsulated, repeatable, and safe." "Stories can be rewritten," Goldin notes, while "memory can't." Goldin reinforces this lesson twice in *All the Beauty* when she invokes the full force of lived memory to speak directly to power—testifying in person about her own addiction before a New York state hearing on addiction recovery, and again in a virtual courtroom where Sackler family members are reluctantly gathered to listen to harrowing, outraged testimonies by victims of the opioid epidemic and the families and loved ones of those who perished. In earlier films, Poitras explored the internet as the battleground for perilous cyberwars against nation states and individual privacy. In the extended scene of the Zoom settlement by the Sacklers, Poitras skillfully reveals another expressive dimension of the internet by offering the glazed, expressionless faces of Sackler scions staring (and with one brother refusing to even turn on his camera) from the computer screen while the damning testimonies unfold as a chilling rendering of the banality of evil.

It is lamentable, but not at all surprising, that no one from the museum world dares to speak up in a film that very effectively reveals how easily the Sackler family has abused art philanthropy as part of a larger ploy to disguise their misdeeds. But with this silence Poitras only underscores the hapless complicity of an establishment unable to challenge the status quo of compromised trustees and avaricious yet insecure institutions locked in a dangerous cycle of perpetual and ever-more-costly expansion. The deplorable current situation stands in stark contrast to an earlier moment, powerfully recalled through archival footage in *All the Beauty and the Bloodshed*, of Goldin's role as a firebrand curator of the controversial 1989 Artist Space show *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, that galvanized the culture wars and revealed the depths of American homophobia while also mustering the collective strength of curators and artists such as David Wojnarowicz, among others, who were willing to put themselves on the line. The contrast underscored between then and now feels particularly relevant for this writer, who works at an institution where Sackler-branded buildings still stand and where little has been done to even acknowledge this glaring offense.

ARMAGEDDON TIME

James Gray, US

BY BRENDAN BOYLE

Whenever the decaying prospects for original filmmaking in the US finally force him to the hinterlands of prestige television, James Gray should consider adapting *The Power Broker*, Robert A. Caro's doorstop biography of New York City master planner Robert Moses. Although Gray's minor-key cinema of depressives and outcasts seems worlds away from Moses-style titans, his movies are nevertheless all about deals struck, favours granted and accepted. What critics commonly read as the filmmaker's recurring focus on fathers and sons is more precisely an interest in transfers of power, when the leg up that's being offered is also pressing down on someone else's neck.

In *The Yards* (2000), the core of the movie isn't the chaste, incestuous love triangle of rising stars Charlize Theron, Joaquin Phoenix, and Mark Wahlberg, but rather James Caan's contractor, master of his own small fiefdom who watches in despair as the scaffolding of small-scale corruption he's built collapses. Robert Duvall's deputy police chief in *We Own the Night* (2006) only wants what's best for his sons (Phoenix and Wahlberg again), which in his eyes means a life lived in uniform, in his shadow and as shells of their possible selves.

Continuing these themes of power and inheritance, *Armageddon Time* has been dutifully touted by critics as Gray's "most personal film" to date, a memoiristic narrative about his surrogate, Paul Graff (Banks Repeta), a Jewish preadolescent attending public school in New York City, 1980. Paul's friend Johnny (Jaylin Webb), a Black boy with astronaut dreams and a defiant streak, has been held back a year, and there but for the grace of God goes Paul, think parents Esther (Anne Hathaway) and Irving (Jeremy Strong), who fret in indiscreet bedroom conversations that their artistically inclined son is "slow." After Johnny gets Paul into a little—and then a lot—of trouble, the Graffs and Esther's doting father, Aaron (Anthony Hopkins), make the decision to send Paul to a uniformed private school, whose smaller assemblies are conspicuously free of Jewish classmates. This choice cuts Paul off from Johnny while also ushering him into a larger structure of privilege, one that the Graffs hope will secure not only economic, but also racial status—whiteness—for his future.

Although Gray has never broken out on the same level as his filmmaking contemporaries (Tarantino, Nolan, Andersons Wes and Paul Thomas), in the last decade he's emerged from an early period of Francophile-approved crime dramas to consistent critical acclaim stateside. Meantime, in press tours spent publicly ruminating on the dwindling prospects of art-minded movies in the American marketplace, he has earned a secondary reputation as a first-class shit-talker, leapfrogging into an elder-statesman position despite never really connecting with a mass audience. This gravitas is mirrored by the cinematic heroes that Gray has evoked in his last few films: Griffith and Kazan in *The Immigrant* (2013), Lean and Herzog in *The Lost City of Z* (2016), and Kubrick in *Ad Astra* (2019).

This time around, Gray has cited an unexpected influence: Frederick Wiseman, whose *High School,* Gray says, was the model for *Armageddon Time*'s assembly scene, in which Paul and his prep school classmates are subjected to a speech by Maryanne Trump (Jessica Chastain), a patron of the school like her brother Fred (John Diehl). Narratively, Wiseman's films, free of explanatory voiceover or talking-head interstitials, make consistent use of structural symmetries to provide contrast and irony. In *Armageddon Time,* Gray, careful dramatist that he is, has traded his usual reliance on melodrama for a contrapuntal strategy that denies the spectator the ability to take any scene at face value.

As too with Wiseman's cinema, the tactic has not stopped critics from doing precisely that. Nothing if not an openly emotional filmmaker, Gray has left himself open to the charges of condescension and white guilt that have been levelled at *Armageddon Time*. A guilt-based cinema would try to correct the past by drawing the right lessons from past transgressions and flattening significant experiences into a simple moral. One such moral is offered by Irving's climactic speech to Paul, which draws on Strong's knack for inhabiting someone failing to meet their moment.

Though the mercurial father gives his son destructive, selfish advice, he's undercut almost immediately by an imagined conversation between the boy and his sainted *zaide* Aaron, perhaps the person Paul most wishes had been there to comfort him after a frightening life experience.

"Don't let the bastards get you down," Hopkins' Aaron says, and in the final moments of the film, Paul walks out on Fred Trump and on his own racist schoolmates. However, Aaron's exhortation, charged by his posture of moral rectitude throughout the film—particularly in a scene set against the backdrop of the Moses-engineered 1964-1965 World's Fair—has also been contradicted by his role in sending Paul to private school in the first place. What is "don't let the bastards get you down" but a paraphrase of the Trumps' bootstraps rhetoric? Ultimately, Aaron's influence does not send his grandson off on a righteous quest, but rather leaves him confused and adrift. Interpreting that final shot as somehow triumphant or self-affirming, as some detractors have done, misreads the film's meticulously arranged ironies.

Irony is not necessarily drama, though, and what viewers might accept in documentary won't always pass as fiction, even when it adheres to classical dramatic principles. A charitable reading of *Armageddon Time*'s sore point—i.e., the narrative utilization of Johnny as a stock "poor Black child" and sacrificial lamb—would be that this character's spare conception provides Webb (a skilled young actor whose performance has been underrated by some of the film's detractors) with room to manoeuvre within the film's overarching structure. While Paul naturally looks up to the older boy whose amiable, inquisitive nature makes him feel like a respected peer, Johnny's frequent mentions of an older brother working "near NASA" in Florida serve as reminders of his own naïveté. Webb nails the flat, door-shutting expression that falls over Johnny's face when he's reminded of his marginal status, but his character is actually the one who learns a cruel lesson in the film: that he has more to lose than he might think.

Although the movie's title references (and tweaks) "Armagideon Time" by The Clash—whose refrain "lotta people won't get no justice tonight" stridently underlines the film's evocation of post-'70s malaise and incipient neoliberalism—an even more relevant track (unheard in the film, but which would have been on the radio in 1980) is a disco hit by Machine, "There But for the Grace of God Go I." That floor-filler told the story of immigrant parents trying to shield their daughter from malign influences in their neighbourhood: "Let's find a place they say, somewhere far away/With no blacks, no Jews and no gays." By the end of the song, their efforts to steer their child straight have only pushed her further away, a harsh irony hammered home by the song's evocative imagery ("She turns out to be a natural freak/Gaining weight and losing sleep") and searing cry of a punchline: "Too much love is worse than none at all!"

Whether this is actually true in the case of Paul and Johnny—especially considering what's implied about Johnny's offscreen fate—is a question that reflects back on the film's ideas about childhood innocence: whether it exists at all, and what's required to protect it. In a crucial sequence, Paul's parents reveal Aaron's terminal illness to him by guiding the boy into the hospital room where his grandfather lies, crumpled and faded. "He shouldn't see him like this," protests Irving—as opposed to the way Paul sees his father in his violent rages, his parents' threadbare marriage, and the at-times frightening pressure to succeed they place upon him. It's not ultimately true that the film sacrifices Johnny in order to educate Paul; both boys already see too much and understand too little. Gray is pessimistic enough to make his film of bad education something besides a valediction: he leaves his younger self alone on the streets of Robert Moses' New York, on a clean and well-lit road with no direction home.

WHITE NOISE

Noah Baumbach, US

BY HANNAH SEIDLITZ

"Who's out there?" Adam Driver's Jack Gladney whispers to the ceiling (from whence we are staring down) with all the self-seriousness of a character in the thesis play of a drama student enamoured with but not entirely comprehending Brecht. "Who are you?" he adds, a beat later. With this and other vaguely postmodern discursions of perspective, Noah Baumbach's adaptation of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* seems to be not just telegraphing the loneliness of a man in the early stages of the dissolution of his marriage and sanity, but also aspiring toward a commentary on—what? Identity? Voyeurism? The nesting meta of adaptation as a form of immortality? Probably all of the above, which attests to Baumbach's general oversaturation of his judicious source. DeLillo's novel is acerbic, dry, and dark, haunted by the quiet, waiting blackness of a powered-off screen; 100 million Netflix dollars later, Baumbach's screen is blinding, bombastic, and flat.

Written in—and explicitly about—the mid-'80s, *White Noise* anxiously observed Americans' increasing tendency to distract themselves from dread with the technicolour packaging of commerce and LCD TV displays, consumption—of products, the unending white noise of information, media static—as a means of staving off death, or at least for-getting about it for a little while. Centring on Jack, a scholar of "Hitler Studies" at the auspiciously named College-on-the-Hill, his wife Babette, and their salmagundi of children as they flee from a mysterious and deadly environmental catastrophe, DeLillo's novel is a classic American story of capitalist isolation, iterated in the sanitized ostentation of the supermarket in the '80s: a locus of predictability, of order amid chaos, and also a liminal space with few or even no windows, a casino for extreme couponers, a Roman forum, and a purgatorial gathering place "where we wait together" (to die)—even The Clash got lost there, remember.

Unsurprisingly, adapting a critique of visual-media-as-means-of-distraction-from-dread with all the pomp and pyrotechnics possible—among them an LCD Soundsystem-soundtracked grocery-store flash mob—inevitably makes for a mishandling of a story best left to the achromic austerity of the page. Still, Baumbach's savviest use of the film medium here harnesses its capabilities for simultaneity. For example, while Driver's Jack and his colleague and confidant, Professor Murray Siskind (Don Cheadle), deliver a duelling double-helix of a lecture on the messianic enormity of Hitler and Elvis, respectively, an exhausted truck driver somewhere on the edge of town collides with a freight train, derailing it and causing an explosion whose fallout launches a noxious cloud of black fumes into the air. This is DeLillo's quasi-apocalyptic centrepiece, the "Airborne Toxic Event" (though the imperilled characters, in the safety of Murray's rainbow classroom, don't know it yet), but the multiplicative, Hitchcockian suspense of Baumbach's rendering could only be effected as such on a screen.

Early on in the film, when Jack comes home from student orientation with plaints of the vieux-riche station-wagon families' gleaming entitlement, Babette (Greta Gerwig) says, in one of the too-many lines stolen from the source material, "I have trouble imagining death at that income level." "Maybe there is no death as we know it," Jack replies, "just documents changing hands." And it seems that, insulated by the invincibility that attends corporate power, Baumbach too loses the ability to conceive of his own death, resulting in a film that plays like its cast were ageless extraterrestrials, aping by careful observation the neuroses and Thanatosian tics of mortals—which is to say, it's very difficult to believe anyone in the film is actually afraid to die.

In Baumbach's earlier film *The Meyerowitz Stories* (2017), Adam Sandler's attempt to manoeuvre backward into a streetside parking spot was captured—wonderfully—with a swinging handheld camera, which, combined with the increasing apoplexy of the other Manhattan drivers and the claustrophobia of the car, created a perfect physical punchline. Conversely, the scenes in *White Noise* depicting the Gladneys fleeing the localized cataclysm in their faux-wood-panelled Chevy station wagon were shot in a studio in front of an LED screen—a technique associated with the *Star Wars* franchise that, perhaps, helps explain the strange lack of intimacy in the images. The Gladneys' Chevy—a vessel always advancing "the action according to a plan," as per Jack's opening and closing aphorisms—is sterile, undangerous; even when a grisly collision rips through the cars directly in front of the family's, the blood and glass glimmer like video-game objects as a dolly guides the camera in a linear sweep past the wreckage. It's soulless: the sequence has all the otherworldly lighting and cold melodrama of a health-class infomercial. Baumbach's strength, and the crux of his voice as a modern auteur, is a kind of squalid realism; here, he takes leave of it and suffers the consequences.

The chief lesson of fabulism is that, in order to sell hyperreality, one must be deliberate about departures from the familiar: Kafka teaches us that in order for cognitive estrangement to carry any pathos at all, everything apart from the choice of fantastical phenomenon must faithfully represent the world we know. By contrast, the histrionic performances and comic-book dizziness of Baumbach's *White Noise* exhausts the emotional resonance of DeLillo's story and blurs the edges of the novel's allegory into a kind of campy noir. Not to mention the lurid, tealish tint of the cinematography, which leaves the viewer missing the coarse, unpretentious 16mm and 35mm textures of *The Squid and the Whale* (2005) and *Kicking and Screaming* (1995), which allowed meaningful connection between character and character, viewer and character, and viewer and filmmaker.

Meanwhile, on Driver, Jack's dark blue-toned glasses (perhaps to match the cyanopsia of the picture itself? a gestural insertion of Jack's perspective?) and cassock-like academic gown are but the trappings and suits of woe, rendering him less an overcompensating neurotic than a caricature of the same. In the novel, Jack needs the glasses in order to look at death—to teach the Führer, to stare at the billowing black cloud of toxic chemicals—but also in order to see everything through death's grim haze; he creates the darkness, has created a field of study centred on its most gruesome personification, to be in control of it. In the film, the glasses give him a dopey goth affectation without any of that compulsiveness: early on, Jack muses aloud about why he might need them, and then says, stupidly, "Better not think about it too much." On the page, one had access to Jack's basest, most perverse desires and insecurities without the need for any heavy-handed self-characterization; on the screen, despite Driver's laudable efforts and the screenplay's awkward attempts to turn his thoughts into dialogue, Movie Jack remains remote.

Worse still, as Babette, Gerwig cannot escape herself or the other permutations of herself she's played for her husband in the past, her twitchy desirability pumping blood into the offbeat muses of *Greenberg* (2010), *Mistress America* (2015), and, most notably, *Frances Ha* (2012). This is exacerbated by the fact that the leads, despite having oozed chemistry as failed-lovers-to-roommates in *Frances Ha*, here never seem to be in consensus about what kind of movie they're in: during the climactic disclosure of Babette's indiscretions, Gerwig delivers a delicate, naturalistic monologue that strikes too contemporary a feminist undertone for the environment, while Driver moves about the room with theatrical impenetrability, never dropping the thick pretenses of his character. On account of the lopsided performances, the film's greatest and gravest departure from the source text—a cloying, happy-ever-after ending of a seraphic sunrise streaming through the window, renewed vows, a clasp of hands—feels abrupt and vacant, contingent on the viewer's concern for and subsequent belief in the Gladneys' marriage. Doing away with DeLillo's denouement of disquiet and disorder, Baumbach has created no real feeling, proving the early observation from one of the Gladney brood correct: "Whatever relaxes you is dangerous."

WOMEN TALKING

Sarah Polley, US

BY WINNIE WANG

Sarah Polley's adaptation of Miriam Toews' 2018 novel *Women Talking* is set in a remote Mennonite community that exists out of time and under its own jurisdiction, with its own rules and superstitions. For years, the nocturnal disturbances that left local girls and women bruised and bleeding were thought to be a result of divine retribution, demons, or "female imagination"; it was later discovered that their collective nightmare was, in fact, repeated sexual assaults carried out by men armed with animal tranquillizers, many of whom were brothers, cousins, or uncles of the victims. When one assailant is identified and threatened with a scythe, the perpetrators are escorted into the city by police for their safety, granting the women two days to organize their response: stay and fight, or leave. Appointed by the remaining colony to deliberate their collective fates, eight members of the Friesen and Loewen families gather in a hayloft-turned-debate hall to consider the possibility of justice and forgiveness alongside their faith.

The vengeful Salome (Claire Foy), unwilling to suppress her rage over the rape of her youngest daughter, suggests retributive justice through violence without concern for her destination in the afterlife. The equally assured Mariche (Jessie Buckley) insists that the women cannot fight, as this would betray their vow of forgiveness and pacifism, thus forfeiting their place in heaven. Ona (Rooney Mara), who retains her inquisitive and gentle disposition despite carrying the unborn child of her attacker, keenly participates in the discussion with musings that probe the power structures and implications embedded in their shared beliefs. The two youngest of the assembly, Autje (Kate Hallett) and Neitje (Emily Mitchell), commit mischief while their mothers and aunts argue, braiding their hair into a single plait and playing practical jokes, one of which involves a fake suicide. But more than offering moments of levity between impassioned monologues, the girls serve as a reminder of futurity—that the women's verdict should not only address their immediate needs, but also embody the principles that could invent a better world.

In adapting Toews' forcefully rhetorical novel, Polley tackles the challenge inherent in crafting any narrative involving sexual assault, which is resisting falling into well-worn narratives about recovery and emotional platitudes that depict survivors in broad strokes. During their heated arguments, the women display grief and fury alongside joy and hilarity, and resume caregiving responsibilities even as they remain in ideological opposition to one another. Their ideas oscillate between the trivial and the profound, and sometimes feed into each other: Greta's recurring story about her beloved horses' tendency to flee in the face of danger suggests that the women respond in kind. With varying shades of hope and resignation, the characters reveal messy and often contradictory desires, confirming our knowledge that discord and disagreement can exist even among survivors of the same events. Whenever the back-to-back soliloquies begin to feel didactic, the film reminds us that the women are engaged in crucial acts of self-instruction that they've long been denied.

Tasked with producing a written artifact of the women's conversation is August (Ben Whishaw), a male schoolteacher who can read and write, and who is allowed by the women to preside over their meeting due to his generally unthreatening mien and the fact that his family has been excommunicated by the church. The narrator of the novel out of formal necessity, he is replaced in the film by Autje, which nominally affords the women in Polley's adaptation with an unmediated forum in which they can freely think, speak, and form opinions. Forfeited in this move, however, is the novel's sustained expression of August's literacy and other privileges afforded by his gender, inequalities in power that surface despite the inverted dynamics of the meeting. With August's presence and its attendant reminder of the limiting, restrictive patriarchy in which these women live thus minimized, the film instead implies the founding of a matriarchal society that feels somewhat fantastical, and perhaps delusional, in its ideals.

Playing into this is Polley's choice to omit any mention of the word "Mennonite" or other location-identifying details in the film, instead alluding to the women's background through plain dress, prayers, and other rituals. Although this exclusion was done out of a well-intentioned concern about further objectifying remote communities that are already subject to voyeuristic interest and increasing media attention, it also functions to soften the particular mechanisms by which patriarchy operates within this community. In its reluctance to emphasize difference, the film instead makes sweeping abstractions about living under oppression and thereby erodes the possibility of forging a genuine solidarity between Mennonite and non-Mennonite women. The result is that Polley's adaptation loses the kind of nuance that distinguishes its source material from mere "good politics." Racing towards a swift resolution that seldom spares time for digressions on Mennonite expressions or semantics, the film *Women Talking* consistently elects to take the safest, most direct path to the women's final ruling even as it simultaneously yields to stylistic hyperbole. Though the actual assaults are never depicted, there exists little restraint in overhead shots of women waking in bloodstained sheets and the recurring sound of bells meant to suggest both a doomsday warning and a call to prayer.

Luc Montpellier's cinematography contributes to this stylized reality, rejecting the characteristic signifiers of the pastoral (blue skies, golden hills, vivid patchworks of plaid and paisley garments) in favour of a determinedly faded palette that italicizes the protagonists' emotional devastation. Approaching total desaturation, Polley's visual language borrows from Larry Towell's *The Mennonites*, a collection of black-and-white photographs of Old Colony Mennonites shot in '90s rural Ontario and Mexico. Yet where Towell's work exudes a sense of mutual understanding that invites curiosity and compassion, the film renders these same shades of grey as something imposed, lacking the stark otherworldliness of monochrome even as it eschews the exuberance of full colour. While Towell's use of desaturation evokes an ageless quality, Polley employs the effect to manipulatively suggest a historical past until a census taker reveals it's 2010. Whether as contrived misdirection or visual congruence to underline despair, the film's grittiness lacks imagination in its rendering of the setting as contemporary, urgent, and alive.

As the film ends, the women begin packing their belongings, brimming with hope and uncertainty for what lies beyond the horizon. Even as there's no promise of security or conclusive answers about how they are to conduct their new lives, though, the heavy-handed direction leading up to their climactic departure creates the expectation that they'll land on their feet. To its ultimate detriment, Polley's film, in its fondness for its protagonists, not only hesitates to expose them to any further risks—narrative, formal, or otherwise—it even saves them from some of the novel's ambiguity. With its few perceptive additions to the discursive arena derived almost exclusively from Toews' exhilarating pages, *Women Talking*'s articulation of gendered power struggles and feminist reimaginings is finally as muted and grey as its photography in its privileging of affirmation over insight.

- Madame, quels sont ces yeux nombreux qui dans la nuit regardent ?

- Monsieur soudain ceci, soudain ceci m’étonne
Il n’y a plus personne
pourtant moi je vous parle
et vous vous m’entendez
puisque vous répondez !

Monsieur à travers tout
quelles sont ces images
tantôt en liberté
et tantôt enfermées
Cette énorme pensée
Où des figures passent
Où brillent des couleurs ?

- Madame, c’était l’espace
et l’espace
se meurt

- Madam, what are these many eyes that look out into the night?

- Sir, suddenly this, suddenly this surprises me
There is no one left
yet I speak to you
and you hear me
because you answer!

Sir, through everything
what are these images
sometimes in freedom
and sometimes locked up
This enormous thought
Where figures pass
Where colours shine?

- Madam, it was space
and space
is dying

Film socialisme

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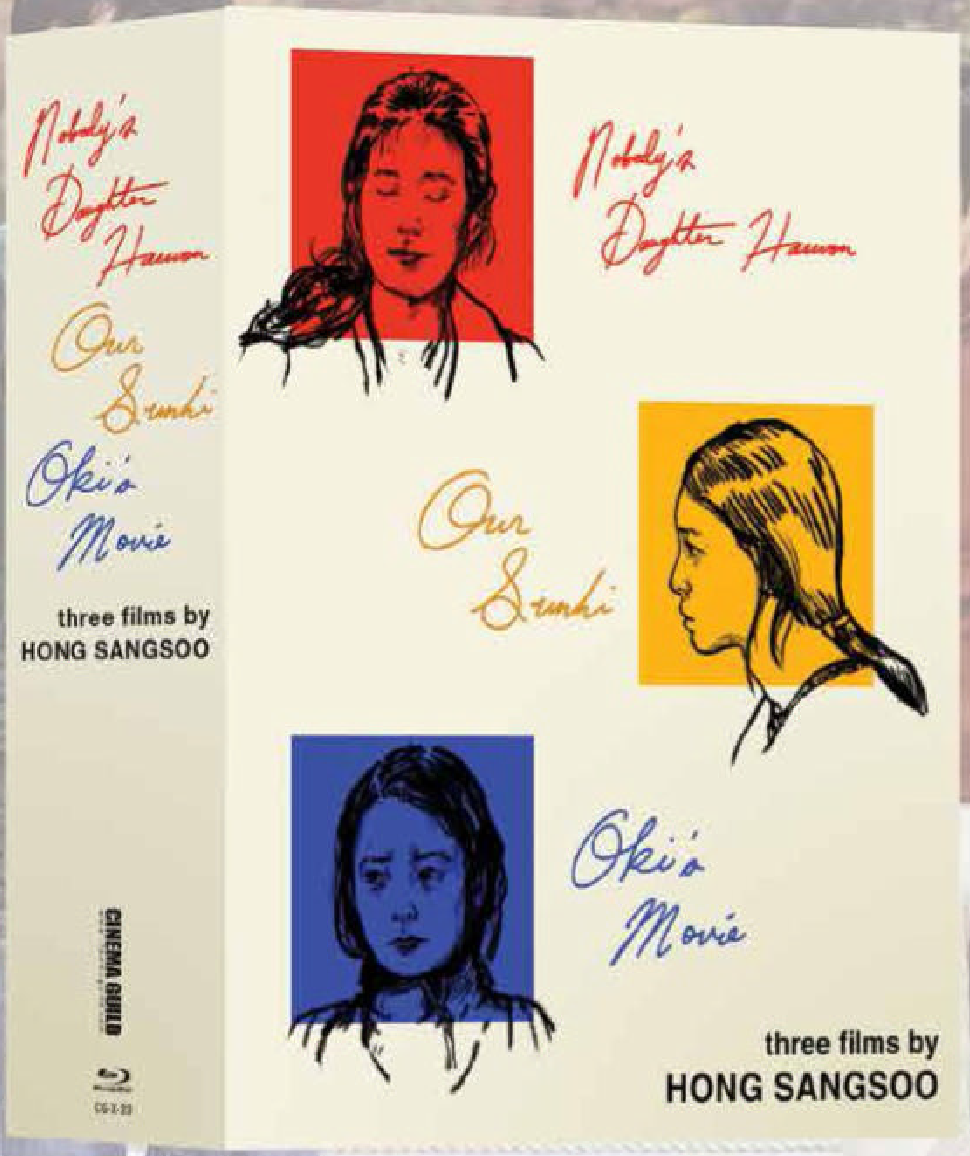
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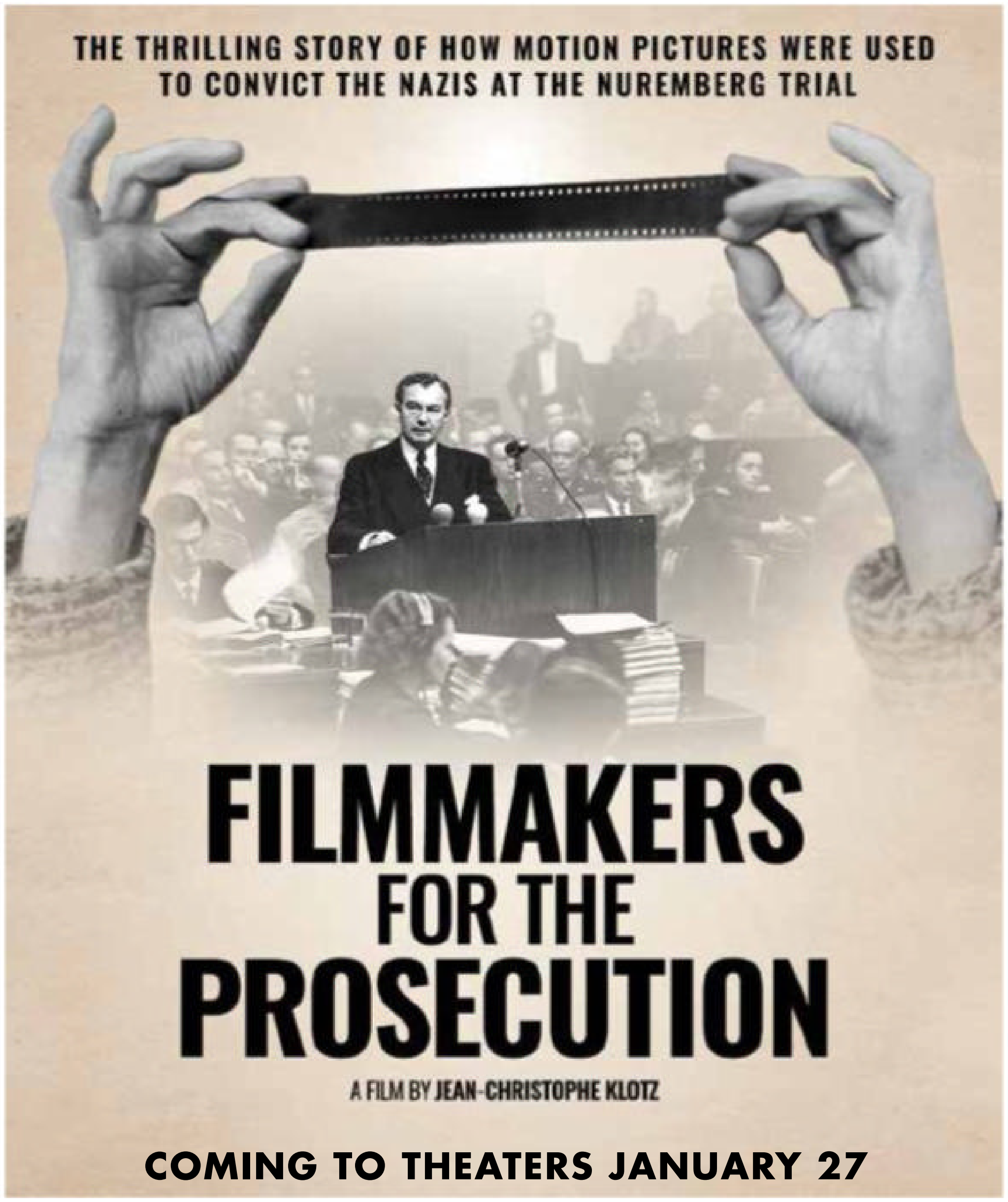
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